Special theme section: Eisenstein, Bogdanov, and the organization of culture

Sergei Eisenstein's System Thinking: Influences and Inspirations

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In 1932, Sergei Eisenstein started work on his key theoretical book, *Grundproblem* (later *Method*), which would present his theoretical system. In the very first notes, he defines a goal that seems to be similar to Aleksandr Bogdanov's tektology: to find a basic structure – an isomorph – for a work of art but also for the growth of plants and bones, for human society and the organization of bees and ants. Eisenstein's system thinking was inspired and defined by his basic hypotheses: the structure of an artwork is perceived as a form that equates to multi-layered consciousness in the transition from the pre-logical, sensual to logical thought that the recipient experiences during the ecstatic perception of an artwork. Essential principles of modernist art – fragmentation, montage, visualization and rhythmic recurrence, the object of Eisenstein's analysis, – determined the new form of Eisenstein's writing and thinking and revolutionized the theory and the form of its rendition. Eisenstein rejected linear logic and sought forms for a hypertext that in his eyes were closer to associative, spherical and labyrinthine thought structures that to date have found expression only in modernist art experiments.

Aleksandr Bogdanov introduced the term 'tektology' to describe a discipline that would unify the social, biological and physical sciences by considering them as systems of relationships; tektology analyzed the organizational principles of these systems. The word came from Ernst Haeckel, whose book with its multi-coloured illustrations of animals and sea creatures *Kunstformen der Natur* (Art Forms of Nature), inspired Eisenstein, as well as Haeckel's theory of evolution, which claimed that ontogeny, an individual organism's biological development, parallels a species' evolutionary development, phylogeny.

We can only speculate about the possible influence of Bogdanov's system thinking on Eisenstein (Yampolskiy 2009: 45–90; Zabrodin 2005). At the time when Eisenstein worked in *Proletkult*, Bogdanov had lost his power.

The idea of a new collective art movement that Bogdanov envisaged for the proletariat, an art form that does not encompass fetishism or individualism, defined the early work of Eisenstein from *Strike* to *October*. These films were inspired by mass actions within *Proletkult*, like Evreinov's *Storming of the Winter Palace* (1920). Mass action became Eisenstein's signature as a film director. However, at the same time, he was also inspired by Meyerhold's idea of movement on stage, Arvatov's concept of production art, futurist and constructivist aesthetics, Rosicrucian hermeneutics, psychoanalysis and experimental

psychology among many other topics. Later, Eisenstein tried to find the basic principle of organization that defined a closed and specific area: the work of art. However, this work was understood very broadly. He contextualized the moving images – of Disney, Griffith, Chaplin and his own – in the broad context of the development of visual culture from cave painting to modernism. The idea of dynamic stability or isomorphism can be found in Eisenstein's approach but with distinct differences. In this paper, I will try to follow the traces of Eisenstein's system thinking.

In 1932, Eisenstein started on his key theoretical work *Method* (initially titled *Grundproblem*), which would present his theoretical system. In the very first notes, he defines a goal that seems to be similar to Bogdanov's tektology: to find a basic structure – an isomorph – for a work of art but also for the growth of plants and bones, for human society and the organization of bees and ants, with references to the books of Jules Michelet and Maurice Maeterlinck. He introduced long quotations from the anthropologist Franz Boas and the zoologist Friedrich Hemplemann, as well as the psychologists Aleksandr Luria, Lev Vygotskiy,¹ Ernst Kretschmer and Heinz Werner. He sought out contacts with Soviet physicists and physiologists but never mentioned Aleksandr Bogdanov. The names of his collaborators in *Proletkult* – Boris Arvatov and Sergey Tretyakov – appeared only in his personal diaries.

Eisenstein's theoretical project was the theory of a modern artist who postulated that the basic principles of modernist art – fragmentation, montage, visualization, and rhythmic recurrence – determined the new form of writing and thinking and in this way revolutionized the theory and the form of its rendition. In this way, Eisenstein's theory acquired the qualities of an aesthetic product inspired by experimental prose, Cubist painting and filmic devices. However, the modernist character of the unfinished book *Method*, a fragment whose meaning becomes apparent in conjunction with other fragments, collided with the totality of Eisenstein's claim to offer a universal theory that was to include all forms of art and all artworks as well as the laws of artistic thought. This contradiction was typical for the period. The theory would itself become an all-embracing oeuvre of Eisenstein.

Eisenstein worked on *Method*, his last book, and one that he never completed, for sixteen years (1932–1948) until his death. He altered the title several times, made frequent corrections to the book's plan, but the main concept remained unchanged. In the context of his earlier theoretical projects – the *Spherical Book* of 1929 and the *Montage Book* of 1937 – the basic idea behind *Method* initially appears rather strange, reductionist (in spite of the material, which has no limitations) and then enigmatic. Yet, it is precisely the earlier projects that provide the key to understanding the particular nature of *Method*.

In the late 1920s, Eisenstein planned his *Spherical Book*. The inner necessity for writing it lay in polemic demarcation. His rivals, the directors Vsevolod Pudovkin, Semen Timoshenko and Lev Kuleshov, had just published books on film theory. Moreover, the Russian formalists severely criticized Eisenstein's innovative treatment of film language in *October* (Timoshenko 1926; Pudovkin 1926; Kuleshov 1929). However, Eisenstein wanted more: he wanted to develop a comprehensive concept that broke up the usual forms used in the 1920s for fixing a theory, that is, forms such as a manifesto, an article or even a book.

'It is very hard to write a book. Because every book is two dimensional. I wanted this book to be characterized by a quality that on no account fits into the two dimensionality of a printed work. This requirement has two aspects. First, that this bundle of essays should on no account be read and pondered one after the other. I want them to be considered simultaneously, because ultimately, they portray a number of sectors, which are arranged around a general constitutive point of view – the method – but aligned to different areas. Second, I wanted to create the mere spatial possibility that would make it possible to step from each contribution directly into another and to make apparent their interconnection. [...] Such a synchronic manner of circulation and mutual penetration of the essays could be carried out only in the form ... of a sphere. [...] Unfortunately,

1 For a detailed account, see Bulgakowa 2014; Vassilieva 2013, 2019.

[...] books are not written as spheres. [...] My only hope is that this book, which expounds the method of reciprocal reversibility, will be read precisely according to the same method in the expectation that we shall learn how to read and write books as rotating spheres. Today we have more than enough books like soap bubbles. Particularly about art.' (Eisenstein 1988, 344)

Eisenstein wrote these thoughts in his diary on 5 August 1929. Between March and August 1929, he repeatedly worked on a plan for a possible anthology (RGALI 1923–1–1030, 12; 1923–1–1012, 1–2).² It was not a collection of the texts he had published or conceived. The project demanded an entirely new approach to the organization of text as an unmotivated changing of perspectives and methods of analysis, which would freely communicate with each other, but would still allow jumps into different dimensions at any time. Eisenstein probably gave up the idea of finishing the book around 1932, for up to that date, there are traces of the project. In the essays for the *Spherical Book*, which Eisenstein wrote in rapid succession from 1928 to 1929, montage is explained according to various models. Montage is comprehended: (1) as a conditioning method to create a chain of conditioned reflexes – as understood by reflexology³ ('Montage of Film Attractions'), (2) as a collage, a combination and recombination of different materials – as understood by constructivism ('Montage of Attractions'), (3) as a system of oppositions, which produce meaning – as understood by linguistics ('Perspectives') and exemplified by Japanese characters ('Beyond the Shot'), (4) as a hierarchical system with changing dominants – influenced by experiments with new music and Yuriy Tynyanov's verse theory ('The Fourth Dimension in Cinema'), and, finally, (5) in terms of the law of unity and the struggle between opposites ('The Dialectical Approach to Film Form') or as a synesthetic procedure that forces the various senses – seeing, hearing, smelling, and tasting – to communicate with each other ('An Unexpected Juncture'). Nearly all the concepts that Eisenstein introduced in this text (attraction, dominant, overtone and interval) are associated with the different models of analysis and interpretation. In this book, the metaphysical symbolist, the vulgar Marxist and the dialectician that are Eisenstein all co-exist, side by side.

Parallel to the *Spherical Book*, Eisenstein planned to write a psychoanalytical book about himself and how his theory originated, *My Art in Life*, a further possible sector (Eisenstein 1997/1998: 13–23). The polarity of the positions sketched here with constant changes of points of view and dimensions creates a tension between the sectors, for the principle of simultaneity was not to be abandoned. It is the only project in which such polarity is admitted. This approach lifts the *Spherical Book* out of the traditional development of theory and impressively demonstrates the new theoretical mentality of the twentieth century.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the world of closed holistic systems broke down. A multitude of different types of discourse appeared; they treated various aspects of a work of art without aspiring to cover the whole (Iser 1999: 35). Totality as a utopia was passé, but one adapted the results of a single science as the worldview – according to old habits – and thus, two modes of thought, the new and the old, were mixed together. A discourse was not capable of translating the phenomenon of art into a referential language, and therefore, metaphors were used instead of concepts. Theory also aids understanding of the discourse, not only the phenomenon of art, and thus, the result was double reflections and self-reflection, mixing ontological and operational aesthetics. A modest professional analytical approach became established.

The *Spherical Book* is a product of this approach. Eisenstein joined the ranks of specialists, who, like the formalists, were able to determine what literature is and what constitutes film. He was one of them, yet he behaved like a man from the previous century: he wanted totality, with all his expert knowledge. His *Spherical Book* is the most radical attempt at achieving unity in permanent change from one level to

2 For a detailed account of this project, see: Bulgakova 1996: 31–108.

3 For a detailed account on connection to reflexology, see: Olenina 200:175–236.

another, based on reinterpretation and a variable use of the non-compatible sectors. Eisenstein offered a total framework for these different discourses by taking the model of a rotating sphere, which enables transitions and guarantees multiple perspectives.

In *Method*, Eisenstein explored how consciousness functions via the imprints it leaves in art forms and art techniques. His ideas about the effects of art underwent a radical reinterpretation. He suggested that during the ecstatic perception of a work, art would activate and provoke within the observer a shift to pre-logical, sensual thought, which would break through rational consciousness like a jolt, as the unconscious does in Sigmund Freud's model. Thus, the structure of an artwork is perceived as a form that equates to multi-layered consciousness and the entire diversity of forms are viewed as an endless chain of invariants that stem from the basic trauma that consciousness experienced in the course of evolution, at the transition from pre-logical to logical thought.

Whereas in the first *Spherical Book* the effects of art are explained with the aid of conditioning, in *Method* the return to the basic (evolutionary) trauma secures the co-participation. Eisenstein discovered a structural analogy between his concept and those of Marx and Freud (but does not mention Bogdanov): Freud sought a basic substance to explain the human psyche and discovered a simple and universal conflict; Marx did this with the structure of society. Eisenstein also looked for a similar, primary conflict in art, which he called the 'basic problem' (*Grundproblem*), and at first, he used this as the title of the book. Starting from the assumption that there is a basic conflict between the layers of consciousness, the traces of which are captured in art forms, Eisenstein then proceeded to new conceptions of isomorphic structures and, finally, to a universal model of analysis through which heterogeneous phenomena can be described, structured and investigated: painting, film, circus and music.

Eisenstein used the concepts of sensuality and rationality to describe different mental structures; sometimes he referred to mythical, 'concrete' or 'objective' thinking and avoided the use of psychoanalytical concepts. In the 1930s, he used Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's term 'pre-logical thinking', but when this term was criticized, he exchanged it for 'sensual thinking', which he found in Marx. Eisenstein studied works written by linguists, anthropologists, missionaries and ethnographers.⁴ With his interest in archaic structures, Eisenstein was part of a general contemporary trend (following the same path as T.S. Eliot, D.H. Lawrence, Ezra Pound, Aby Warburg and Antonin Artaud). However, it is not the archaic per se, or the mythological practices of the regimes of Stalin or Hitler that interested him, but rather the modernist experiments in the arts, which he compared with examples from classical antiquity, the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. Eisenstein regarded the formalized structures of sensual thinking as a reservoir for artistic means.

Eisenstein's analytical model, which he called *Method*, can attribute all art phenomena to one and the same schema (pre-logical/logical, sensual/rational and conscious/unconscious). The model in *Method* is characterized by a strange reductionism, analogous to the interpretation of the primary and secondary features of psychoanalytical hermeneutics. Eisenstein transformed a law of dialectics about the unity of contradictions into binary opposition. Vyacheslav Ivanov interpreted the book as a utopia of total semiotization of the world (Ivanov 1977).⁵ However, on closer scrutiny, the semiotic interpretation of the model in *Method* has severe limitations.

In one of the final chapters of *Method*, 'Circle', Eisenstein returned to his idea for the *Spherical Book*, and on 17 September 1947, remarked:

'In 1932, I began to organize my theoretical notes on film (which I have been doing for fifteen years now), and I noticed that I dream of writing a *Spherical Book*, because for me everything is related to everything and everything passes over into everything. The only form that corresponds

4 Eisenstein wrote many notes in the margins of his copies of books: Lévy-Bruhl 1922 (Russian edition 1930); Werner 1926; Kretschmer 1922 (Russian edition 1927); Winthuis 1928; Granet 1934; Covarrubias 1937.

5 For further interpretation and contextualization of the book, see Vogman (2016).

to this is the sphere, where one can [change] from one meridian to any other meridian. Since that time, I have longed for this book, and now perhaps more than ever.' (RGALI 1923–2–268)

The grounds for the amalgamation of Eisenstein's first and last projects lie in the way he thought and wrote. He rejected linear logic and sought forms for a hypertext that in his eyes were closer to the associative, spherical and labyrinthine thought structures that to date have found expression only in modernist art experiments, not in theoretical writings. The theory of pre-logical mental structures, which are mediated by art forms, emerged as a hybrid work, constructed according to the principles of an artwork.

In 1932, Eisenstein compiled a catalogue of themes for the projected book. He listed the thematic nodes and the examples that he wanted to use to illustrate the parallels between pre-logical thinking and artistic devices: *pars pro toto* – synecdoche and close-up; sympathetic magic – the function of the landscape in literature; participation – actors' experience; the reading of tracks by a hunter – constructing the plot of a detective story (Eisenstein 1989c: 13–23). Over the next sixteen years, Eisenstein wrote four different versions of the book; each of them focusing on different aspects and applying different modes of analysis (like his idea for the *Spherical Book*): (1) an exploration of the formalized structures of pre-logical thinking (*Method I*), (2) an investigation of the basic forms, (3) the genesis of his theoretical model in the form of 'theoretical' memoirs, and (4) the anthropological foundations of this theory.⁶

In the first version of the book, *Method I* (1932–1940), Eisenstein concentrated on means of expression and arts that do not need or allow verbalization: gestures, intonation, music and circus. The gesture is seen as the Ur-form, the origin of words, which is why Eisenstein collected material about the role of pantomime in Shakespearean theatre and the acting style of Henry Irving. Eisenstein read memoirs by Russian actors and returned to his own concept of expressive movement as well as Vsevolod Meyerhold's idea for gestural 'pre-play'. Intonation is understood as a substitute for meaning; therefore, Eisenstein took long excerpts from Yvette Guilbert's book *L'Art de chanter une chanson* (Guilbert 1928). Although the sections on circus and Wagner were never written, Eisenstein made a detailed plan of the circus chapter (in November 1933) and read works by and on Wagner. In *Method I*, neither vision nor hearing are regarded as basic senses in a theory of art, but instead there is the sense of touch – a sense that is usually excluded from aesthetic theory and for which there is no method of conservation. Eisenstein did not seem to know the texts by Johann Gottfried Herder and Walter Benjamin; his interest in touch was aroused by Denis Diderot's writings, Filippo Thommaso Marinetti's tactilism manifesto and a book by Léon Daudet (Daudet 1930). In the chapter about the features of pre-logical thinking, Eisenstein attempted to include the senses of smell and taste in his theory but later abandoned this approach. He returned to the sense of touch as one of the basic senses involved in the origins of art in the fourth book, *Anthropology*, which begins with a chapter on haptic sensing. Eisenstein's attentiveness to phenomena that are non-verbal or incapable of being preserved by modern recording techniques also made him interested in rhythm. Eisenstein regarded rhythm as a basic element in the creation of an effective artwork because the biology of an organism is based on rhythmic principles (e.g., breathing, peristalsis and the functioning of the heart), as is ecstatic experience. Eisenstein attempted to link the ideas of the German school of experimental psychology and physiological aesthetics, associated with Ernst Kretschmer, Wilhelm Wundt and Friedrich Nietzsche, with inspirations from his study of the mystical practices of Ignatius of Loyola. However, his analysis of the ecstatic state and the production of ecstasy in art is later expanded into a separate study, 'Pathos' (1946/1947), in which Eisenstein uses examples from the Rougon-Macquart series of novels by Émile Zola, which he lists in the catalogue of themes in *Method I* (Eisenstein 1967: 91–128).

6 I do not refer here to the version of the text compiled by Kleiman (2002) but to the archive manuscript (RGALI 1923-2-231-270, 321–323), published in 2009 and 2017 (second edition) in four volumes by PotemkinPress, Berlin.

From the language phenomena, Eisenstein selected examples of linguistic pre-logic, particularly mimetic and magical practices like incantations. He examined the relationships between a sound, the shape of a letter and the meaning, as well as Filippo Thommaso Marinetti's and Velimir Khlebnikov's onomatopoeia. This section comprised theories of the origin of names and metaphor and research on various kinds of slang, dialect and argot. Metaphors were regarded as a practice connected with taboos, as a deviation from naming and calling. Eisenstein studied writers who had broken up the forms of logical language (such as Edgar Allan Poe, James Joyce and Marcel Proust), who had followed the logic of dreams (Gérard de Nerval) or who had worked with ambivalent double meanings (Anatole France's irony and the collection of erotic riddles and fairy tales of Aleksandr Afanasiev). He attended Nikolai Marr's lectures on the origin of languages. Marr's palaeontology, which sought connections between the stem of a word and its meaning, directed Eisenstein's interest towards the origins of art, namely the Ur-phenomena of representation: cave paintings, children's drawings, outline drawings and silhouettes. In all these forms, Eisenstein looked for the connection between rhythm and movement and found this perfected in the ornament. Via the ornament as the pictorial embodiment of rhythm, Eisenstein approached the dynamic phenomenon of the plot. The plot is interpreted as a pre-logical and mimetic phenomenon and as an embodiment of the ritual, which is based on the rhythmic organization of movement and verbal ambivalence.

The shift in the analysis of non-verbal phenomena to the plot is explained through a stepwise construction:

1. Double meanings and linguistic ambivalence, which enable a connection to be made between motor kinetic functions and the trope (metonym, metaphor and riddle), on the basis of magical practices: non-naming, a transferred naming, ritual incantation, etc.
2. The masculine, the feminine and the bisexual as a physical form of ambivalence
3. Ambivalence in a character (Jekyll and Hyde) and in the personality of an artist (Lewis Carroll and Charles Dodgson)
4. In perennial themes (the search for a father).

Eisenstein had not yet worked out in detail the connections between these steps but only sketched them. Eisenstein interpreted ambivalence as an invariant of the unity of opposites and tried to find a dialectical formula of form, which he described, however, with the help of Freudian terms such as 'urge'. For *Method I*, he wanted to write a series of studies and portraits under the title 'Le cas de ...' which can be translated as 'The [...] case' or 'The file on [...]': Honoré de Balzac, Jules Verne, Lev Tolstoy, Stendhal and Lewis Carroll were the candidates for his case studies. Eisenstein intended to analyze the individual consciousness of an artist in whose personality and work ambivalence is forcefully present as an expression of conformity to general laws. In this section, he also wanted to investigate utopias as an expression of the same drive, operating at the level of the collective unconscious.

This substantial manuscript has 315 double-sided pages, including material and excerpts collected during the eight years of work. The word 'start' appears for the first time on 25 June 1940, when Eisenstein read a text by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe about objective (*gegenständliche*) thinking. Before, he had used Tolstoy's term 'concrete thinking' or Jonathan Swift's 'language of objects'. Eisenstein was writing a chapter about the sense of touch as a substitute for vision and all other senses when he read Goethe's 'Significant Help Given by an Ingenious Turn of Phrase'. He tore the pages out of the book and put them in the folder with his notes.

The new plan foregrounded expressive movement, visual representation and character, wherein he looked for a dynamic triad consisting of kinesis, mimesis and psyche. At this time, Eisenstein used a German title for the book, *Grundproblem* (Basic Problem), which replaced the first version, *Grundthema* (Basic Theme). Whereas *Grundthema* was placed in the context of notes on bisexuality, *Grundproblem*

appeared in the notes on dialectic. Henceforth, the concept developed in two directions and culminated in two volumes: (1) about the basic forms and (2) the genesis of his theoretical model (both 1942–1943). Eisenstein discarded the chapters on utopias and Lev Tolstoy and focused the analysis of rhythm, expressive movement, ornament, silhouette drawings, metonymy and metaphor around a new nucleus, namely, the construction of the plot. Ambivalence in language was developed in a chapter on riddles and magic rituals. From the ritual, which brings together magic, imitation, movement, gesture and rhythm, Eisenstein proceeded to situation, which he understood as the materialization of the trope in the plot. An analysis of situation, like a slave and a king exchanging clothing, for example, occurs in many literary examples, from E.T.A. Hoffmann, Lion Feuchtwanger, Heinrich Heine and William Shakespeare to Balzac. Eisenstein wanted to show that the figures of pre-logical thinking form the basis of the ‘appealing anecdote’ in the plot. The perennial themes and characters are now not restricted to the search for a father but include blood vengeance (Hamlet) and incest (Oedipus). Eisenstein did not analyze Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *Kubla Khan, or, A Vision in a Dream* or Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim*, as he had planned earlier, but instead examined the detective story in detail. The manuscript ends abruptly in the middle of a chapter on Balzac’s *Lauberge rouge* and Dostoevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov*, because Eisenstein had to begin shooting *Ivan the Terrible*.

In January 1944, he began a new volume, which he referred to as Part 2. Here Eisenstein rethought the entire concept as an anthropological project. He returned to the sense of touch, animism and chthonic myths. The body was now no longer a model but a direct source and material for art. The skin was analyzed as the surface for painting, the tattoo as the first auto portrait and the womb as a primal form and the origin of architecture and ceramics. Bodily fluids and excretions (blood, urine and excrement) headed up the original colour spectrum. The skeleton, as a model for structure, was substituted by the fluid body, and plasmatic, polymorphic qualities were sought in the form. Expressive movement was studied by taking the amoeba as an example. Disney became a central object of the analysis because in his work, plasmatic qualities of form, colour and rhythm are combined with animism and totemism (Eisenstein 2012). The semantics of the basic visual forms were investigated in place of the plot; here, the circle was a central focus. Freud’s Oedipus was replaced by Otto Rank’s hypothesis concerning the primary trauma of birth. This is why Eisenstein did not use the search for a father as a perennial theme but instead the archaic myth of the deluge. Pars pro toto in painting, which was not treated at length in *Method I*, became a chapter of some length based on the series of paintings *The Bathers* by Degas; the composition is interpreted as embodying the basic drive to return to the womb, which is caused by birth trauma. In the previous volume, both struggle and the law of fusion of opposites were focal points; here the more archaic state of non-differentiation was evoked. The last notes for this book, which were written four days before Eisenstein died, begin with a quotation from the *Rigveda*, which is about the original non-separation of existence and non-existence.

In one of the last chapters, Eisenstein wanted to provide an overview of the school of Soviet film, embedded in one of his basic ideas that cinema represents the last stage in the development of the arts because it encompasses all experiments and forms (RGALI 1923–2–244). In his last notes for *Method*, this project is replaced by another more ambitious plan. Eisenstein outlined a project on film history as an expression of the collective unconscious in which Russian and American film traditions play a role as well as the French surrealists and German film (RGALI 1923–2–268; Kracauer 1947). The analysis of the collective unconscious in film, inspired by Siegfried Kracauer’s recently published book *From Caligari to Hitler*, replaced the chapter on utopias, which was dropped.

Both titles, *Grundproblem* (Basic Problem) and *Metod* (Method), allude to discursive clichés. When philosophy became established as a discipline in German universities in the mid-nineteenth century, ‘*Grundproblem*’ was one of the most frequent words used in the titles of academic works on the history

of philosophy, aesthetics and psychology.⁷ Whereas the word in Russian has a certain enigmatic quality, 'Grundproblem' in German is just as much a cliché as the word 'method' in Soviet discourse of the 1930s. However, the word could also have a programmatic meaning: method is not the same as theory, law or canon; it designates an operative, open and dynamic system that guides epistemological and practical activity. Eisenstein understood the concept to mean the specific way of thinking itself; thus, his book does not provide a canon but an analytical formula that can describe not only art but also thought.

Whereas both titles, *Grundproblem* and *Method*, are distinguished by their firm place in contemporary discourse, the disciplines in which Eisenstein located his project are not in the least traditional. In his diary – parallel to the catalogue of themes for *Method I* – Eisenstein noted the components that together formed the basis of his theory.

The list consists of the first letters of words:

'X

Ec – Ecstasy

D [ialectics] – on method (synopsis of dialectics).

M [ysticism] – history of dialectics (mysticism as preliminary [stage])

I [ntroduction]

Sup [erposition] – on the question of knowledge/epistemological devices? techniques

R [ecurrence] – (imitation)

L [inguistics]' (RGALI 1923–2–1131, l. 31).⁸

The nodes that are the sources and elements of *Method*, and thus define it, bring together variousgnoseological models (dialectics and mysticism), specific problems of aesthetics (imitation) and psychology (ecstasy and superposition) in a strangely sexualized epistemic structure.

Ecstatic states are connected with mysticism, which Eisenstein defined as the preliminary stage of dialectics. At the beginning of the twentieth century, mysticism was enjoying a revival and was a hot topic of discussion by European modernists. The image worlds in the dreams of St Theresa of Avila and Juan de la Cruz are discussed by Charles Baudelaire in *Les Salons* (1845) and Dmitriy Merezhkovskiy in *Die spanischen Mystiker* (1939). The protagonists of *Ulysses* (1925) and *La Nausée* (1938) had read Ignatius of Loyola and were well aware of the hallmarks of his psychological techniques. Eisenstein was introduced to various hermetic and mystic doctrines in 1920 by the Rosicrucian Boris Zubakin, who was also a big influence on the young Mikhail Bakhtin. Eisenstein collected literature on mysticism all his life, which shocked leftist German intellectuals.⁹ In his relationship with Konstantin Stanislavskiy, who had applied yoga techniques in his acting method before Eisenstein did, there is jealousy: Eisenstein did not interpret Stanislavskiy with reference to Buddhism but with reference to Loyola's mental exercises.

In Eisenstein's understanding, the comic is a mirror image of ecstasy. He was not interested in classic texts of the early twentieth century on humour (by Bergson or Freud), but primarily in grotesque drug-induced Mexican humour: *vacilada*. 'Vacilada is argot for the hilarious trance caused by marihuana' (Brenner 1929: 180). Eisenstein had experienced and studied this phenomenon while in Mexico. Further, the passages he quotes from Baudelaire's *Les paradis artificiels* of 1860 (Baudelaire 1946) are all concerned with the particular kind of hilarity associated with taking opium. Perhaps Eisenstein became aware of these passages through reading *Entwicklungspsychologie* by Heinz Werner (1926), who quotes frequently from Baudelaire.

'D [ialectics]' is understood primarily as the fusion of opposites; perhaps this is why mysticism is defined as its preliminary stage. One foundation of mystic doctrine is the notion of 'opposites falling

7 The catalogue in the State Library in Berlin lists over 100 books published between 1880 and 1932 in which the word 'Grundproblem' appears in the title.

8 Eisenstein used Ya (*yazykoznanie* for linguistics), the last letter of the alphabet.

9 Videotaped recollections of Hans Feld, archive of the Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek, Berlin.

together into one' for which Nicholas of Cusa suggested the term *coincidentia oppositorum*. The intention was to describe a paradoxical phenomenon of this unity, in which opposites still remain opposites. Only this bipolar state allows us to describe the phenomenon of God or the basis of existence. As the source, which introduced him to bipolarity, Eisenstein named Otto Weininger's book *Geschlecht und Charakter* (1903; Gender and Character), which he read in 1920 (RGALI 1923–2–1109, 133). Eisenstein was not interested in Weininger's apocalyptic predictions but in the anthropological interpretation of male–female as the dialectical basis of our culture and knowledge. He was fascinated by the notion of androgyny, which travelled from Plato via the alchemists to Emanuel Swedenborg and was celebrated in Russian symbolist circles. Eisenstein nourished his notions about androgyny from the cabbala and fictional and ethnographic works: Ernest Crawley's *The Mystic Rose* (1902), Josef Winthuis's *Das Zweigeschlechterwesen* (1928), Balzac's novella *Seraphita* (1834; which popularised Swedenborg's ideas and presented them in the form of a love story) and novels by Joséphin Péladan. He quoted from Vasiliy Rozanov and his book *Ljudi lunnogo sveta* (1913; People of the Moonlight), which is understandable: Rozanov understood bisexuality as an epistemological, not an ontological, category.

Eisenstein turned dialectics into a sexualised and anthropological concept by interpreting dialectics as a mystical *coincidentia oppositorum* and as embodiment of the male–female in androgyny: 'Dialectics is a projection into consciousness (in a philosophical conception) of the bisexuality of our structure. The legends about the breaking apart of the sexes. Bisexuality as a remnant – as a memory of an existing phenomenon of bisexuality ([Adam's] rib and the separation of Eve)' (Diary, 10.III–22.VIII. 1931; Mexico, RGALI; 1923–2–1123, I. 182).

The ancient myths provide the material to understand the phenomenon of unity:

'The most archaic type of 'unity in the universe' – close to our sexually undifferentiated forefathers; the separation of Ad[am] and Eve, Plato's being, the story of Lilith and the two people who were joined at their backs (in cabbala) – is actually closer to the vegetative phenomenon. Here I shall have to insert facts from the biological drama before the evolution of the sexes – after [Charles Stockard] *The Physical Basis of Personality* [New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1931]. For example, the question of same-sex twins, who develop from one egg [...] Genius – is a person who fills the dialectic development of the universe and can engage with it. Bisexuality as a physiological pre-condition must be present in all creative dialectics' (RGALI; 1923–2–1123, I. 138–139.).

Eisenstein notes these thoughts in his diary and then writes a letter to Magnus Hirschfeld, dated 23 May 1931, and asks him for proof of Hegel's bisexuality.¹⁰

Eisenstein's ideas about conflict, or struggle, are similarly sexualized. The books about conflict that he consulted are not confined to Marxist interpretations, such as Friedrich Engel's *Dialektik der Natur*, which he read in 1926 in a recently published Russian translation. In 1930/1931, he studied *The Philosophy of Conflict* (1919) by the British sexual psychologist Henry Havelock Ellis. In Eisenstein's notes, there is a frequently mentioned thought about the conflict-laden harmony in a work of art, which is based on bipolarity, on the union of opposites, which strive 'upward' and 'downward'.¹¹ The reference to Ellis makes one suspect that this state should not be interpreted as a description of ecstatic, mystic or dialectic unity, but as an orgasm, which is defined in *Method* as a short-lived but the 'most common' transition to ecstasy (something for everyday use) – attainable repeatedly and regularly.

Recurrence and imitation stand at the golden section in Eisenstein's schema. Elsewhere, recurrence was for him inseparable from rhythm and imitation. For, as he stated in his text '*Imitation as Mastery*'

10 The draft of the letter is in Eisenstein's diary, published in Eisenstein (1998: 96–97).

11 'The dialectics of an artwork is based on a highly interesting polarity. The effect of an artwork derives from the fact that a contradictory process is at work in it: the impetuous, progressive, striving upward to higher mental levels of consciousness and at the same time in the form of penetrating levels of deepest sensual thought' (Eisenstein 1988: 146).

(1929), the art of the modern age, which included his own works, did not imitate the form but the fundamental structure, that is, the rhythmic organisation. With reference to film, this is not the pictorial representation but the ideogram of motion (Eisenstein 1989c: 46–48). These two phenomena are also connected to ecstasy and mysticism. Loyola's *Exercises* propose achieving an ecstatic state through rhythmic repetition. In the first third of the twentieth century, rhythm appeared to be a universal remedy for solving all problems. Economists, psychologists, philosophers and artists all highly praised rhythm. They declared it to be a mediator between nature and art, which safeguards the aesthetic perception and helps to overcome the fragmentation so celebrated in modern art. Rhythmic principles are sought in space (Vasiliy Kandinskiy) and movement (Max Reinhardt and Vsevolod Meyerhold), in the awareness of poetry, music and film (Hans Richter's *Rhythmus 21* and Leopold Survage's *Rythme coloré*). In 1919, Osip Brik wrote *Zvukovye povtory* (Repetition of Sound) and in 1929, Andrei Belyy *Ritm kak dialektika* (Rhythm as Dialectics). Eisenstein quoted from René Fülöp-Miller's book *Die Phantasiemaschine* and Ernst Kretschmer's *Medizinische Psychologie*, where the effect of rhythm was explained through vegetative-somatic functions of the human organism.

Eisenstein's fascination with the biological nature of rhythmic effects seems to be very close to Nietzsche's determination of aesthetic values and categories as biological, as manifested in his concept of Dionysian intoxication (in German, *Rausch*) (Barck 2000: 386–388). Eisenstein, whose notion of ecstasy resembled the physiological state of intoxication, was not so radical. He took rhythm and repetition as a model for imitation and explained them with reference to the nature of aesthetic perception. Rhythm is the basis because Eisenstein saw nature, humans and artistic work as a circle that guarantees the union of the cosmic, biological and social.

Eisenstein first made notes and selected quotations on rhythm for *Method* after having read Wilhelm Reich's essay on the orgasm. In 1934, Eisenstein contacted Reich and asked him for a copy of his book on orgasm in which rhythm is investigated. Reich's reply is enthusiastic: 'I was particularly pleased to hear from a leading comrade in the artistic field that art has a great deal to do with the central problem of the living substance, with orgasm.' He sent Eisenstein the book plus some issues of the journal that he had published in exile in the Netherlands and also gave his views on Eisenstein's *Potemkin*: 'In *Potemkin* one is completely overcome by its rhythm, which is a direct continuation of the biological-sexual basic rhythm. As far as I am able to judge, the rational thoughts of communism are most effective in film when they are linked in a good way with our biological rhythm' (Eisenstein 1984: 254).

The French term 'superposition' does not fit with the sexualized concepts discussed above (dialectics, mysticism, ecstasy, recurrence and rhythm). Eisenstein had investigated this peculiarity of perception and thinking in his text 'The Dialectical Approach to Film Form' (1929/1989a), which was to be included in the projected *Spherical Book*. The phenomenon of superposition, which was observed in stereoscopy, drew attention to the differences between natural perception and perception via technical apparatus. In general it was attributed to the destabilization in the understanding of subjectivity (Crary 1990). Eisenstein, however, saw superposition as a creative potential of human thought processes, which continually restructures the 'imprints and impressions'. It is these reflections that helped Eisenstein to see montage as something non-linear: montage is not realized by a successive sequence of images but consists of a series of superpositions:

'In fact successive elements are not positioned side by side, but on top of one another. For the concept (feeling) of movement arises in the process of superposition of the retained impression of the first position of the object and the position of the object that is seen next. [...] The discrepancy between the contours of the first image memorized and the image that is perceived next – the conflict between them – creates the feeling of movement [...] The eye follows the direction of an element. It retains the visual impression, which then clashes with following the direction of the second element.' (Eisenstein 1989a)

The technique of superposition causes the perception of three dimensionality and is the origin of the illusion of movement in film projection and the image (= symbol). When two variables of an order are superposed, something arises that opens access to a higher dimension: one picture plus another sum to an image and one image plus another sum to an abstract concept. The impression is two dimensional; the imagination is three dimensional. The concept must include a temporal, fourth dimension. This concept not only interprets the montage, but also reinterprets the image in the film: it exists in the process of remembering and forgetting, and the perception of the image functions as interaction between the memory of what has just disappeared and the forgetting of what was just seen. Thus, not only the origin of the illusion of movement in film but also film itself is understood as materializations of human memory.

Symbol and concept are linguistic phenomena that mean a change of dimension (image → word), and Eisenstein's reflections on montage always end with his reflections on the nature of film language. Thus, it is not coincidental that his list of 'sources and components' ends with 'L [linguistics]'. Eisenstein was familiar with all contemporary trends and developments in linguistics.

Eisenstein's interest in cases where language comes up against its own limitations led him to the work of Fritz Mautner, who developed a model whereby the world is doubled in language, which, in principle, cannot perform its task of rendering reality because there is no analogy between the statement and the object of reference.

Eisenstein doubted this radical position and turned to Karl Bühler, who had also worked on the structure of thought and verbalization of vision. Eisenstein's manuscript contains a typewritten translation of a chapter out of Karl Bühler's *Sprachtheorie. Die Darstellungsfunktion der Sprache* (1934), which examines the connections between language and film from the standpoint of representational functions. Bühler's interest in this was originally aroused by his study of jumps, which Eisenstein compared with the spatial breaks in film montage (such as from a close-up to a long shot) and the movements of an observer around an object. Both cannot be continuous because they are repeatedly interrupted by pauses and diversions. In language, breaks are bridged by syntax, and in film, by dynamics. In Bühler's opinion, the breaks are not caused by technology but by the nature of perception. In support of his view, he analyzed texts by Homer, which he interpreted like montage lists. This approach definitely influenced Eisenstein's analyses of literary descriptions in works by Aleksandr Pushkin, Guy de Maupassant and Lev Tolstoy.¹² While reading, Eisenstein took note of the spatial fragmentation, the framing, the movement of the eye as manipulated by the author through the details in a close-up or a long shot and unmotivated changes of perspective. Yet, Eisenstein did not subscribe to Bühler's conclusion, namely, that linguistic representation is always richer than a film's due to the compact character of a linguistic unit. Bühler also compared the skills of a film viewer to those of a detective, who has to read the visual clues and construct a causal relationship between them.

Eisenstein compared himself to a pathologist, which is similar to Benjamin's surgeon. He also referred to Salieri, to whom he intended to dedicate his unpublished book, as a pathologist. Eisenstein stated that the post-mortem, analysis by dissection, always results in a static approach, but he overcame this in his studies as the dynamics come from the film. As a scientific frame of reference, Eisenstein used palaeontology, which investigates life in bygone periods through analyzing fossils. Georges Cuvier, whose name appears in the very first notes for *Method I*, played an important role in establishing palaeontology and became famous for his reconstructions of extinct animals from fossil remains. In Eisenstein's *Method*, double readings constitute one track and this basis becomes the link that relates an image (a fragment) to its context, a dynamic narrative (plot), and unite both thought paradigms.

12 The most well known of these texts is 'Pushkin, the montageur' (Eisenstein 1995: 109–223).

The paradigms, which determine intuitive and rational insights, are foregrounded by Carlo Ginzburg in his analysis of an evidential paradigm. The first type includes the interpretation of a trail by a hunter, of symptoms by a psychoanalyst and of clues by a detective. This type of knowledge is connected with a hypothetical paradigm of medicine that always deals with symptoms and never with transparency. The exact, rational knowledge worked out by science excludes the individual view, for this makes mathematical classification impossible. In this case, numbers and data are interpreted but not feelings produced by the senses, like a smell or a musical tone. This is why physiognomy and graphology, which belong to the first paradigm, lost their scientific status in the twentieth century. However, when the statistical method (such as Bertillon's) fails and is unable to grasp the subject (for criminology, the criminal), a method of identification emerges that is based on a trace (i.e. a fingerprint), which reproduces the evidential paradigm. Semiotics also belongs to this paradigmatic world, whose origins could be dated back to the 1870s (Ginzburg 1989: 96–125).

Eisenstein followed the first paradigm. He explored the sciences that do not provide exact descriptions – palaeontology, psychoanalysis, graphology, physiognomy, ethnography and anthropology – and with their aid, he interpreted gestures, intonation and stories that are based on *pars pro toto*. Among the traces that Eisenstein attempted to decipher and classify are formal structures of language and thinking in images – pre-logical thought. In fact, palaeontology is of fundamental importance to the project because Eisenstein not only analyzed fragments, but he also mainly produced text in the form of fragments. The fragmentary nature of the project even permeates the syntax, for parts of sentences are missing or marked with dots, brackets and dashes, which convey intonation and gestures. The text consists of notes, diary entries, analyses and quotations from the scientific literature, illustrated journals, pulp fiction, belletristic literature and political commentaries. The text material by other authors in five different languages became a part of Eisenstein's own text, just like the glued-in pictures, photos, drawings and pictograms. Fragmentation and montage strongly characterize thinking in the new twentieth century.

Eisenstein, a master of dialectical montage in film, carried this principle over into theory. His model attempted to outwit epistemological instability through re-contextualization and interpretation. The collection of selected quotations was taken from a variety of sources and disciplines that are mutually exclusive, like psychology and psychoanalysis or mysticism and Marxism, for which Eisenstein found a new, surprising context and new references. Thus, Eisenstein, who, with his intertextuality, referentiality, incompleteness of discourse, arbitrary fragmentation, repetition and shifts, exhibited all the characteristics of a post-modernist, brought us back to an interpretative narrative.

To understand the text in *Method* requires special skills. The reader must move through the pages as if moving through the labyrinth of a hypertext, follow unmotivated changes of perspective and associative jumps, read drawings and pictograms, and instead of a causal logic, follow the argumentation of the pictorial logic of the author; that is, the reader must read a scholarly study according to rules that are otherwise only applied to poetic texts or films. Eisenstein did not see this as any kind of rupture. He did not write linearly or diachronically, but spirally, spherically and simultaneously; he wrote in the way that thinking often functions. The ideal form of this publication would be a hypertext, which would retain the virtual simultaneity of all the references, but which would also make it impossible simply to follow the flow of the text. The double nature of the old and the new forms threaten to break the book apart from within. This makes reading the work both a tortuous and a fascinating experience, as its author intended: the beginning and end should be reversed and contradictions united into a symbiosis of information and deformation.

For Eisenstein, the advent of film was the prerequisite for creating a new kind of theory of art, thanks to the analytical nature of film itself. Taking new forms, it can provoke the reader into embracing new models of perception. Film art reveals the structure that remains hidden in other arts. It enables one to manipulate the direction, the attention and the meaning, making the analysis productive. Close-up,

double exposure and reverse movement are film tricks, but Eisenstein understood them as reifications of figures of thought. Above all, these figures determine the thinking of the author. *Method* was a product of the visualization and cinematographization of thought, a further experimental, ecstatic, and dialectical film by Eisenstein.

Commentary by Pietro Montani

Oksana Bulgakowa turns to *Method*, the great treatise on which Eisenstein worked between 1932 and 1948, to question the possible relationship between Eisenstein's theoretical thought and Aleksandr Bogdanov's tektology.

As per Bulgakowa's argumentation, both authors worked on projects to unify all sciences into one 'system' based on anthropology. However, the epistemological paradigms they referred to in conceiving the system remain characterised by a basic difference, which I would express as the contrast between a spatial and cartographic model (Bogdanov) with a model that is temporal and stereoscopic (Eisenstein). In this regard, Bulgakowa opportunely recalls Eisenstein's idea of a spherical book, in which the author 'rejected linear logic and sought forms for a hypertext that in his eyes were closer to associative, spherical and labyrinthine thought structures'. Such a contrast, between the all-encompassing ambitions of the system and the desire to show its principles and procedures in fragmentary and rhizomatic fashion, leads straight to the heart of the problem.

The issue, in fact, concerns the nature of a process that can, by the same token, discover its own, original rules only during its happening, but also shows its intimate conformity to a general systematic picture. This kind of process is very well suited for a work of art – more precisely, the idea that a work of art is like a growing organism – but becomes problematic when one also tries to apply it to the form of logical reflection.

Bulgakowa grasps with clarity this strong tension and explores it pertinently, leaving, however, at least one question unanswered, which I deem critical. With regard to Eisenstein's aesthetics, for example, Bulgakowa writes: 'The structure of an artwork is perceived as a form that equates to multi-layered consciousness and the entire diversity of forms are viewed as an endless chain of invariants that stem from the basic trauma that consciousness experienced in the course of evolution, at the transition from pre-logical to logical thought.'

I completely agree with this statement. However, it remains yet to be clarified in which sense the 'transition from pre-logical to logical thought' is a 'basic trauma'. On this critical point, which deserves in-depth discussion, I can offer here only a short observation.

My idea is that the concept of 'trauma' would lose all its vagueness if pre-logical (or sensual) thinking, juxtaposed to logical thinking, were reformulated in the rigorous terms used by Vygotsky, without doubt one of the most meaningful sources of 'inspiration' for Eisenstein.

Vygotsky, in fact, spoke about integrating processes, thanks to which our sensory and motor cognitive schemes, rooted in the agency of our body, are made to cooperate with the articulated language, which, on the other hand, is peculiar in that it has the capacity to take leave of the body and become autonomous (as is clearly visible in the phenomenon of writing). However, when describing this laceration, Vygotsky also pointed to the laboratory in which it could be exemplarily repaired, which he located in the intimately creative phenomenon of inner speech. Only in this way, I believe, can it be fully understood why, in *Method*, Eisenstein wrote that: 'The rules for the construction of inner speech are exactly the same as those behind all the different rules obeyed when constructing the form and composition of works of art.'

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