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

Eisenstein's 'Magic of Art'

JULIA VASSILIEVA

Film and Screen Studies, Monash University; e-mail: Julia.Vassilieva@monash.edu

| **Keywords:** Cinema, Art, Sergei Eisenstein

Introduction by Julia Vassilieva

The *Magic of Art*, written a few months before Eisenstein's death in February of 1948, is a condensed and sometimes cryptic artistic manifesto that I discovered in the private archive of Alexandr Luria, a close friend of Eisenstein. It was first published in the journal *Kinovedcheskie zapiski* (Moscow 1990), No.8 and later included in Eisenstein's posthumously published magnum opus, *Method* (Moscow 2002) as a prologue. The importance of the piece is that it forcefully reiterates several key themes that recur throughout Eisenstein's theoretical output.

First, Eisenstein here revisits his earlier ideas, formulated in his now canonical essay 'The Montage of Attractions', concerning audience engagement and spectatorial reaction. His rethinking of the role of the spectator as an essential element of art in general and especially of cinema, and his understanding of the viewer as an active, creative agent, anticipate the subsequent emergence of reception studies in critical theory. Secondly, this concern with the spectator is tied in with another of Eisenstein's important theoretical positions, namely, his insistence that art should not be mimetic but kinetic – that it should not 'reflect' the world but transform it – a contention that has reverberated throughout debates between realism and formalism in cinema over the twentieth century and into the present.

Furthermore, Eisenstein here formulates in a nutshell the pivotal argument of what he termed *Grundproblem* – the main problem of art, researched and elaborated in *Method* – which for him consists in the ability of a work of art to mobilize two opposing impulses: one towards a rational, intellectual insight and enrichment, realized mainly at the level of the content of the work, and another towards the engagement of the whole sensory, affective and emotional sphere and achieved mainly through the form of art. The latter, in turn, only becomes possible, according to Eisenstein, because the language of form is based on a plethora of mechanisms developed throughout the cultural history of humankind and its evolutionary prehistory as a species. These mechanisms include such phenomena as synaesthesia; the ability to perceive a part as representing the whole; rhythmical repetition, and so on – mechanisms that, working in combination with one another, create the 'magic' of art. This magic has almost involuntary power over a spectator, and yet it coincides, for Eisenstein, with the process by which the formation of subjectivity and agency begins.

The Magic of Art

Sergei M. Eisenstein 1947

Moscow, 8.VII.1947¹

Translation by Julia Vassilieva

Art has never been 'art for art's sake' for me.

Nor has it been a way of creating something that would not resemble the world – 'a world of my own'.

And yet it has never had the aim of 'reflecting' the existing world, either.

I have always taken on the task of deploying of influence to impact upon feelings and thoughts, to exert influence upon the psyche and exercise this influence to mould the spectator's consciousness in the desired, needed, selected direction.

This was clearly stated in the first published declaration of my *credo*. And it has remained an all-encompassing orientation throughout my work.

I shall quote from *LEF* (1923), No 3 (June–July):

"It is the spectator who constitutes the basic material of the theatre; the objective of every utilitarian theatre is to guide the spectator in the desired direction (frame of mind) ...

... The means of achieving this are all the component parts of the theatrical apparatus ...

... Attraction ... is the primary element in the construction of a theatrical production – a molecular unit of the *efficiency* of the theatre ...

... A trick ... since it signifies something absolute and complete in itself, ... is the direct opposite of an attraction, which is based exclusively on an interrelation – on the reaction of the audience.

... *instead of a static 'reflection' ... montage of arbitrarily selected independent effects (attractions) but with a view to establishing a certain final thematic effect – montage of attractions.*

... The way of completely freeing the theatre from the weight of the 'illusory imitativeness' and 'representationality', which up until now has been definitive, inevitable, and solely possible... "²

From 'external' attractions I have gradually shifted to a system of means that would influence the spectators' subconscious region – the 'sub-sensory' sphere – in other words, exert influence not only over consciousness or the raw emotional and sensory faculties of my spectator, but also exert influences of which the viewer is unconscious.

A source of such devices turned out to be the laws of pre-logical thought, and the sphere of their application the *form* of the work of art itself.

But it is interesting that these *means* are not only related to the stage of sensuous or 'magical' thought. They are also magical in the sense of overtaking the will of the perceiving subject.³

1 First published in *Kinovedcheskie zapiski* (Moscow 1990), No.8. Later included in *Method*, Vol. 1, 'Grundproblem', pp. 46–47 (instead of an introduction), Moscow 2002: Eisenstein-Centre.

2 Quoted using the following translation of 'Montage of Attraction' by Daniel Gerould. *The Drama Review: TDR*, Vol. 18, No. 1, *Popular Entertainments* (March 1974): 77–85.

3 [S. Eisenstein's note:] "Magic, here, is not an empty figure of speech.

For art (the real thing) artificially returns the spectator to the primitive stage of sensuous thinking, to its norms and types, and this stage is in reality a stage of magical connection with nature.

When you have achieved, *par exemple*, a synaesthetic merging of sound and image, you have subjected the viewer's perception to sensuous thinking conditions, where the synaesthetic perception is the only possible one – there is still no differentiation of perception. And you have the spectator 're-oriented', not to the norms of today's perception, but to the norms of a primordially sensuous one – he is "returned" to the magical stage of sensation.

And the idea that has been realized by a system of such influences, embodied in a form by *such means* – irresistibly controls the emotions. For the feelings and consciousness in this case are submissive and manageable, almost as if one were in a *trance*.

And from a passive magical state which perceives art synaesthetically – it is possible to move to an actively magical one in which the spectator is possessed and managed by a magician-creator.

The former is worked on by the latter."

My orientation has shown – and still bears a vestige of – how art's predecessor, ritual, was used, namely:

– to conquer – by exerting influence – to override, to subordinate to one's will.

There (and then) – nature and the forces of nature.

Now, in the case of art, the spectator's psychology (and feelings) are taken possession of, and his ideology is overridden and transformed by my own ideology as a propagandist (by my idea, my conception, my worldview).

The project of 'reflection' has always appeared to me as passive and unworthy.

I always imagined art as 'one of the means of violence' – always as a tool (weapon) for transforming the world by changing people's consciousness.

It is interesting that this is directly linked with the process of personality-formation in nature, whereas 'reflection' is linked with primary automatism, with the eidetic ability to reproduce, which is a stage lower than personality formation – a purely imitative instinctual phase and directly associated with the lowest reproductive stage – the biological reproduction of oneself in ... descendants: both in animals and in plants.

These two consecutive developmental phases coincide at their zero points: *the magical capture is achieved by means of reproduction*.

(The idol of a god made by me *is* god, and this god gradually falls into my hands: I flog him when he doesn't deliver a harvest!)

In the mimicry dance of creatures such as bees, or in an eidetic drawing (very early) or (later) in 'pars pro toto'⁴ in the substitutional 'part' (later on – sign), taking-over is conceived through reproduction.

Then the functions diverge.

Later they overlap.

They may be completely oriented in one direction (Repin, Shishkin – the extreme of passive reflection).⁵

Later on, not only is the objective world reflected, but what is reflected 'on the canvas' is a distorted reflection of the world in the psychopath's dysfunctional psyché (for example, Salvador Dali) etc.

The hypertrophy of the other line can be found in that 'aggressive' view of art that I have (and had).

In its realization the unity with reflection is indissoluble.

In the beginning this process is fully visible – and can be only visible in cinema: in our credo-films of the 1920s.

A minimally distorted 'in itself' fragment of reality is presented on its own in the frame (the 'nec plus ultra' of *reflection*⁶).

And a maximum *expression of author's will* through the juxtaposition of fragments, in this context, forces – 'where needed' (in the desired direction) – the spectator's consciousness (through his feelings and sensations).

All this has been noted to show that the very purpose of my art is, in its 'profundity', linked to the primary functions of ritual at a time when art had not yet been singled out as a separate domain from other human activities.

4 'the part taken for the whole'.

5 Il'ya Efimovich Repin (1844–1930) and Ivan Ivanovich Shishkin (1832–1898) were Russian realist painters.

6 'the ultimate example of *reflection*'.

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