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Introducing Eisenstein’s Theory

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Eisenstein thought cinema into existence in a way unparalleled by any other in the history of the past century. In a sense everyone is familiar with an Eisensteinian image, whether this be the Odessa steps sequence or the montage of the gods; these images have been familiarised through appropriation in contexts as varied as their use in cinema itself, right through to advertising. Eisenstein’s cinematography is, therefore, part of contemporary film perception and as easily incorporated into film language as Shakespeare is into everyday speech.

The essays in this collection seek to celebrate the diversity of Eisenstein’s legacy. They explore Eisenstein’s re-thinking of the relationship between art and reality and art and revolution. Moreover, they explore Eisenstein’s legacy as an aesthetician whose writings on cinema have given rise to experiments in different artistic fields. These experiments constitute a virtual diaspora, incorporating areas as diverse as animation, Irish and French literature and drama, psychoanalytically and semiotically informed film theory, feminist film theory and practice, Caribbean aesthetics, and beyond the subjectively negotiated image into the age of digital recording.

The image, and its power over mind and emotion, was of absolute importance to Eisenstein. Indeed, no other writer has thought so seriously or written more persuasively on the image and its relation to modernity than has Eisenstein. Moreover, no other film theorist has so consistently examined the film image through such comprehensive
and sweeping analyses of, and insights into, all the other arts and into the nature of human perception itself. For Eisenstein, film could create an image of both interior and exterior reality and it is this power of giving concrete expression to the inner workings of the human psyche that seems to have led to his enthrallment with the works of James Joyce. The interior monologue in *Ulysses*, for example, exemplified for Eisenstein literature’s closest approximation to cinema’s capacity to depict what he, the Soviet filmmaker, termed ‘undifferentiated wholeness and flow of undifferentiated representations of the stage preceding the stage of consciousness that actively “makes divisions” at higher stages of its development’ whilst simultaneously correctly combining ‘the *continuity* (characteristic of early thinking) and division (developed consciousness) that is, of the independence of the *single* and the generality of the *whole*’. This combination could only be perfectly realised for Eisenstein in cinematography (Eisenstein, 1987: 249-50).

The montage lists prepared prior to shooting entailed a careful concentration of pieces chosen for their capacity to express a developing line of thought, or emotion. The shaping of an image evolved through associational logic, whereby one sense image chased after another; but the development of the inner rhythm of the work became an increasingly complex system of unity in diversity.

For James Goodwin in *Eisenstein at 100: A Reconsideration*, Eisenstein’s montage lists provided a methodological model for Kracauer’s *History: The Last Things Before the Last*. The montage lists composed by the Soviet filmmaker for the creation of the interior monologue of protagonist Clyde Griffiths in *An American Tragedy*, the product of Eisenstein’s 1930s American visit, led Kracauer to the insight that the multiplicity of factors and computations within any historical situation meant that any historical explanation must, by its very nature, be provisional (Goodwin, 2001: 104). Goodwin is pinpointing the contrapuntal play of montage best delineated in Eisenstein’s analogy between contrapuntal montage and the fugue as exemplified in Bach (Eisenstein, 1987: 285).