Eisenstein’s Regenerative Aesthetics: From Montage to Mimesis

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A historical shift of perception around the turn of the century is examined in terms of Eisenstein’s aesthetic innovations and political commitments in cinema. The analysis considers how Eisenstein’s attractions and montage developed in relation to various movements and ideas such as Symbolism, Dadaism, tragedy, ecstasy and mimesis, and in relation to his interest in productive and collectivist art. These developments are seen to resonate with or to anticipate debates in late modernism and Critical Theory.

I

In his creative work, Eisenstein advanced through extreme aesthetic, political and cultural measures, often refusing to subordinate or privilege any one influence in relation to another. This makes the task of uncovering a coherent web of influences counter-productive. Judging his work in terms of a specific Marxist aesthetics or avant-garde movement which he might have been attached to at any particular point in time does justice neither to the very wide spectrum of interests and involvements he had, nor to the momentous and rapidly changing environments he experienced. His major works would need to be related to the wide range of political and cultural debates that emerged in late modernism around the period of the two World Wars, requiring a comprehensive evaluation of the constellation of art movements and intellectual currents at that time.
The centre of this constellation may be seen, for Eisenstein, as a diffuse and regenerative aesthetics. One that combines the productive, interventionist tenor of avant-garde artists ranging from Constructivists to Brecht and that is set against a backdrop of the increasingly disruptive stimuli of a runaway modernity. Here we may be able to see an anticipatory affinity between Eisenstein and some of late modernity’s themes of mimesis - defined broadly as the capacity to relate to the external world through patterns of similitude, affinity, reciprocity, and interplay. Eisenstein’s idea of circus and variety attractions – based on the notion of shock - accord well with the new sensibilities at the turn of the century, to be found in writers such as Poe, Baudelaire, Simmel, and particularly Walter Benjamin. For both Eisenstein and Benjamin these shocks or attractions would eventually come, via the cinematic technique of montage, to reverberate in the spectator’s perception of reality, thereby developing direct connections through film technique between producers and audiences.

II

Eisenstein’s concept of attractions relates specifically to the ways in which cinema could impose a shock on its audiences and in this way impose an idea-image. His technique of montage, based on ‘a dialectical yearning of the image to gain new dimensions’ (Deleuze, 1997: 36), was meant to push the imagination ultimately towards a sublime state - ‘an imaginative totality which goes beyond the imagination’ (Deleuze, 2000: 157). The dialectically achieved image thus formed would have a direct impact on the audience, and to this end Eisenstein substitutes a montage of opposition for Griffith’s parallel montage. Hence a forceful, positive, regenerative aesthetics emerged, relying on the *technique* of films to connect literary or artistic quality to a political, materialist, tendency. This active intervention accords with the new technologies and democratic ethos of the era, and it places cinema within a context of revolutionary movements, at least until a break with the politics of communism came with the Stalin-Hitler pact of 1939.