

FILM IN THE HOUSE OF THE WORD

In 1928, Sergei Eisenstein published a brief manifesto on film sound that has met with no direct critique or reply in more than half a century. In his statement, written within an euphoric moment of convergence between theory and practice that gave us OCTOBER and THE GENERAL LINE, and suggested to him the grand project of an 'intellectual montage,' Eisenstein began an effort that precipitated in a group of empty centers and their satellite notes and essays: the hypothetical cinematic 'realizations' of three written texts...AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY, ULYSSES, and CAPITAL. Eisenstein himself, under the extreme pressures of the Stalinist 'restoration,' largely abandoned his research into intellectual montage for extended meditations on synaesthesia, the microstructure of the frame, and the architectonics of film narrative, in a resurrection of the quest for a fusion of the arts; the man who directed a production of THE VALKYRIE in Moscow must have seen, in the musical drama of Wagner, a prefiguration of some of film's boldest ambitions. These ambitions still obtain; that research, advanced by Vertov, has never entirely languished.

"The dream of a sound film has come true... The whole world is talking about the silent thing that has learned to talk." Eisenstein awakened to the factualization of desire with surprised ambivalence, as if discovering the Silent Thing to have been carved by Pygmalion...for film, perennially associated with music, had never been generically silent. It had been mute, once an apprentice mime in a precinematic (and prelinguistic) theater, now a journeyman aspiring to an intricate mimesis of thought, to whose construction a sound-on-film technology was as vital as cinematography itself.

It was not simply sound, then, that threatened to destroy all the "present formal achievements" of montage, but the dubious gift of speech, the Prime Instance of language, the linear decoding of the terrain of thought into a stream of utterance. Thus film, from its first word, was to be perceived in a double posture of defilement and fulfillment, and Eisenstein found himself present at a rite of passage; the end of the edenic childhood of montage was accompanied by a wistful vision of "fading virginity and purity".

The syndrome of logophobia has been pandemic throughout recent practice in the visual arts. "How many colors are there in a field of grass," Stan Brakhage asks in METAPHORS ON VISION, "for a crawling baby who has never heard of green?" We are prompted to enter into complicity with the author: the word is anaesthetic, truncating the report of an innocent sensorium, depriving thought of that direct Vision of a universe of ideal forms that would pierce, sweep away, the clutter of denatured simulacra created by language...and so the infant, traversing the fulsome excellence of a Garden that somehow exists without the intervention of the Word, must see an infinitude of colors.

Others reason that the crawling baby sees no "colors" at all, since the notion of color is a complex abstraction, closely bound to language and culture (there are natural languages that make no distinction between "green" and "blue") that brackets a neurophysiological response to a portion of the electromagnetic spectrum. The field of grass is without form, and void.

During painting's culminating assault on illusion, in the 1950's and '60's, one often heard the epithet "literary" applied as a pejorative to work that retained vestiges of recognizable (and thereby nameable) pretext sufficient to the identification of an imbedding deep space...although the presence of the word as a graphic sign (in Robert Motherwell's JE T'AIME paintings, for instance, or Frank Stella's MARY LOU series) was accepted with routine serenity. One heard Barnett Newman admonish Larry Poons when the the younger painter had published, as a show poster, a photograph incorporating an assertive pun on his own name; saw Carl Andre in ardent moral outrage at the very mention of Magritte's name; witnessed the monolithic public silence of the generation of Abstract Expressionists.

The terms of the indictment were clear: language was suspect as the defender of illusion, and both must be purged together, in the interest of a rematerialization of a tradition besieged by the superior illusions of photography. Only the poetics of the title escaped inquisition, for a time. If there is some final genetic bond between language and illusion, then the atavistic persistence of illusion...fossil traces, upon the painterly surface, of thickets, vistas of torn gauze, spread hides, systems of tinted shadows, receding perspectives of arches...affirms, at the last, the utter permeance of language.

Now we are not perfectly free to make of language an agonist in a theater of desire which is itself defined by the limits of language. Every artistic dialogue that concludes in a decision

to ostracize the word is disingenuous to the degree that it succeeds in concealing from itself its fear of the word...and the source of that fear: that language, in every culture, and before it may become an arena of discourse, is, above all, an expanding arena of power, claiming for itself and its wielders all that it can seize, and relinquishing nothing. In this regard, Eisenstein is characteristically abrupt, claiming for film, in accord with Lenin's own assessment of the Revolution's priorities, something of the power of language: "At present, the film, working with visual images, has a powerful affect on a person and has rightfully taken one of the first places among the arts."

Film, like all the arts, was to instruct, to move; its considerable privilege derived, ironically, from a double illiteracy: it's diagesis was legible to a mass populace that could not read, and its formal strategies were largely illegible to a burgeoning elite that could. Eisenstein was at some pains to preserve film's claim to political efficacy: in the midst of the short text he paused to offer a gratuitous recantation for the "formalist" errors of OCTOBER, submitting that the advent of sound will spare the director from resorting to "fanciful montage structures, arousing the fearsome eventuality of meaninglessness and reactionary decadence." Invoking the power of language, he issued preliminary disclaimers for near occasions of sin not yet contemplated; in 1932, in A COURSE IN TREATMENT, he was to write of "wonderful sketches", never to be expanded, for montage structures that anticipate a much later historical moment in film, fanciful enough to normalize the "formalist jackstraws" of MAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA.

Sound, we read, will ameliorate film's "imperfect method," improve its thermodynamic efficiency: what brings the menace of speech abolishes writing, and the mode of reading that accompanies it, eliding those discontinuities in an illusionist continuum introduced by the intrusion of the graphic intertitle. Parenthetically, as well, it will restore to equilibrium an imbalance in film's psychological distance from the spectator by obviating "certain inserted close-ups" that have played a merely "explanatory" role, "burdening" montage composition, decreasing its tempo. However, and above all, complete dissynchrony between sound and image is to be maintained (Eisenstein did not, for the moment, insist on more drastic disjunctions), since the permanent "adhesion" of sound to a given image, as of a name to its referent, increases that image's "inertia" and its independence of meaning.

Thus far, we find no single imperative that requires Eisenstein's logophobia. But suddenly (the adverb is peculiarly his own: an intertitle that announces the massacre on the Odessa Steps in POTEMKIN) one may recognize, within the diction of a text that adroitly warns us away from language, a crucial agenda: the preservation of a dim outline of what it is that he is so anxious to protect from language. One may imagine something whose parts are to be denied, and protected from, independence and mutual adhesion; it is not to be burdened, nor its inertia increased, nor its tempo retarded; it is to remain portable across cultural boundaries, and its elaboration and development are not to be impeded.

There are only two hypothetical symbolic systems whose formal descriptions meet such requirements. One is a universal natural language; the other is a perfect machine. As one recalls that the two are mutually congruent, one remembers that Eisenstein was at once a gifted linguist, and an artist haunted by the claims of language...and also, by training, an engineer. It seems possible to suggest that he glimpsed, however quickly, a project beyond the intellectual montage: the construction of a machine, very much like film, more efficient than language, that might, entering into direct competition with language, transcend its speed, abstraction, compactness, democracy, ambiguity, power...a project, moreover, whose ultimate promise was the constitution of an external critique of language itself. If such a thing were to be, a consequent celestial mechanics of the intellect might picture a body called Language, and a body called Film, in symmetrical orbit about one another, in perpetual and dialectical motion.

It is natural that considerable libidinal energy should be expended to protect such fragile transitions in thought. The ritual gesture that wards off language also preserves language, as well as film, for a later moment of parity.

All of Eisenstein's bleakest predictions came true; the commercial success of the talkies polarized the development of a system of distribution that virtually guaranteed the stagnation of the sound track as an independent and coeval information channel sustaining the growth of a complex montage in consensual simultaneity.

Even if the requirements of Socialist Realism had not supervened, the vicissitude of specialism might well have prevented even Sergei Eisenstein, the director, from attempting the expected at "first experimental work" with sound along the lines of "distinct non-synchronization" with images.

Nevertheless, the work goes on, and filmmakers have responded, with increasing rigor, to the urgent contradictions he first expounded. Not through immediate design and cathexis, but by way of an historical process of the exhaustion of its alternatives, the deferred dream of the sound film presents itself presents itself to be dreamed again.

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A man condemned to death begged Alexander to pardon him, vowing, given a year's reprieve, that he would teach Bucephalus (who already spoke Bulgarian, Farsi and Greek) to sing. When his friends derided him for a fool who merely postponed the inevitable, he replied: "A year is a long time. The king may die; I may die. Or...who knows!...maybe the horse will learn to sing!"

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