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# Sergei Eisenstein: The Anthropology of Rhythm, a conversation with curators Marie Rebecchi and Elena Vogman

July 10, 2018 / in [Exhibition Reviews](#), [Interviews](#), [Reviews](#), [Spring 2018](#), [#Resolution](#)

**Tags:** [exhibition](#), [rhythm](#), [Sergei Eisenstein](#)

The exhibition Sergei Eisenstein: The Anthropology of Rhythm (Nomas Foundation, Rome, 20 September 2017 – 19 January 2018) explores the intersecting artistic, anthropological, and political dimensions of the unfinished film projects of Sergei Eisenstein: *Que viva Mexico!* (1931-1932), *Bezhin Meadow* (1935-1937), and *Fergana Canal* (1939). Curated by art and film historians Marie Rebecchi (Paris) and Elena Vogman (Berlin), in collaboration with designer Till Gathmann (Berlin), this exhibition is continued by the show *Eccentric Values after Eisenstein* at Espace Diaphanes in Berlin (20 April – 25 May 2018).

Rhythm is a medium of change; it constitutes a



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transition from fear to joy, from ennui to awareness, from a simple movement to choreography or dance. The Soviet film director Sergei Eisenstein understood better than anyone that rhythm is necessary to enact transformation: as an anthropological means of organising experience, rhythm becomes a vehicle of revolution. Numerous documents from Eisenstein's archives (stored at the Russian State Archive of Literature and Arts (RGALI) and the National Film Foundation of the Russian Federation [Gosfilmofond] ) were exhibited for the first time, including notebooks, drawings, film footage, and photographs. A volume published by NERO Rome accompanies the exhibition.

**Mileto:** Your exhibition opens with an entrance map designed by the typographer and artist Till Gathmann. Here, time and space are connected and intersected, in order to follow Eisenstein's journeys. In a sense, this map embodies the conception of memory as 'dissociation' theorised by the Russian director. Eisenstein argues that the actor's understanding leads him '*back* with a flash to a whole mass of particular cases': the actor's activity of 'going back' disarticulates matter, rather than generalising it into an abstract association. Do you think that the *rhizomatic* character of the exhibition Sergei Eisenstein: The Anthropology of Rhythm enables the visitors to actively partake in the 'circle of sensory-emotional cognition'?

**Rebecchi:** First, the map designed by Till Gathmann shows our shifting away from a biographical approach to a focus on the

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‘travelling material’. It intertwines time and space in order to better understand the *rhizomatic path* both of Eisenstein’s journeys (from Paris in 1929-30, to the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic in 1939, passing through the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1935-37) and his anthropologically-oriented film projects: the unfinished film *Que viva Mexico!* (1931-32), the destroyed film *Bezhin Meadow* (1935-37), and *Fergana Canal* (1939), which came to a halt before filming even begun.

We may find some similarities between this conception of time and space and that presented in the work *Théorie de la dérive* (1956) by Guy Debord, in which the philosopher sets out the basic sense of urban drifting and ‘psycho geography’ as an exploration of urban environments: ‘In a *dérive* one or more persons during a certain period drop (...) all their (...) usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain.’<sup>[1]</sup> [\[#\\_edn1\]](#) The situationist project for a new form of urban life is somehow reflected in our *topographic gaze* and *typographic work* on Eisenstein’s heterodox fieldwork. The map also evokes the space-time mechanisms of the dream. For instance, the condensation and the displacement in the very same graphic configuration.

Concerning the second part of your question, yes, the ‘*rhizomatic* character’ of our exhibition is able to activate a virtuous cycle, intellectual and sensible. In the chapter of *Method* titled ‘Rhythmic Drum’, Eisenstein states that cinema – with its capacity to combine different streams of rhythmic and ritual movements, both organic



and inorganic, ranging from dance to breathing, prayer to meditation, drumming to the sound of a heartbeat – reveals itself as a medium capable of reaching down into the deepest layers of ‘sensuous thinking’.<sup>[2]</sup> In this way, he outlines what we could call an ‘anthropology of the moving image’, linking the corporeal and emotional appeal of cinema with invocations of archaic practices, forms, and desires. Bodies are thus in turn transformed into a ‘living medium’, capable of ‘processing, receiving, and transmitting images’.

**Mileto:** Theorising an ‘*anthropology of rhythm*’ is an attempt to find a melody in the material, since tracing the exposed movements allows us to reconstitute the social meaning of these gestures. We find here a ‘connection of everything with everything’ (in Eisenstein’s words) as soon as we expose our perception to a seriality that, outside any time-direction or specific purpose, leads us to the necessary *trance* to disarticulate and re-articulate reality. As you say in your book, rhythm is a ‘vehicle of revolution’, in the sense that, through its *circular movement* of repetition and return, it becomes the most effective instrument of irruption and revolt. How is it possible, however, to combine this *physiological* dimension of rhythm and connection with the intrinsic *representational* purpose of cinema, although cinema itself is primarily a ‘motoric’ expression?

**Vogman:** What does the physical, even the choreographic movement of turning have in common with the social and political change of a

given situation? Hannah Arendt once pointed at the constitutive tension of two opposing meanings of the word 'revolution'.<sup>[3]</sup> [\[#\\_edn3\]](#) Originating from the astronomical context where it defined a cyclical and regular motion of the stars, in modern times the word 'revolution' has come to define a unique historical upheaval of a given political order, enacted by men and not by the cosmos or providence. In his images from Mexico and his later anthropologically-oriented film projects in Ukraine and Uzbekistan, Eisenstein brings these two different meanings into play. Here, we perceive the emerging relations of history poised between repetition and irruption, the return and the revolt, between a single destiny – a *body or a gesture* – and the social and political narrative which constitutes its background.

Language and body are inextricably related through social practice. In his theory of carnival, Mikhail Bakhtin, similar to Eisenstein, points to a crucial component in the inversion of social positions.<sup>[4]</sup> [\[#\\_edn4\]](#) This *status reversal* occurs when certain people – usually those occupying an inferior position – exercise ritual authority over their superiors. In line with this insight, Eisenstein analyses the etymology of the Russian word *oboroten*, which means *werewolf* or *revenant*. *Oboroten* contains the word *oborot*, which denotes both 'turn' and 'figure of speech'. Like revenants, words and forms also invoke the rhythmical choreography of the turn to unfold their transformative power. Through a rhythmic movement, they can reveal – or conjure – new social and political perspectives in an unknown or forgotten past.

**Mileto:** Another fundamental notion present in the exhibition is that of *regression*. We find it in the tribal dances, liturgies, or labor practices visible in the Mexican footage, as well as in the ‘protoplasmic’ photos by Jean Painlevé – exhibited at Nomas Foundation since they are really fundamental to Eisenstein – or in the famous director’s drawing (also exhibited) of the human figure who sinks a limb into the uterine water (*Mutterleibversenkung*). In all these representations, the impulse to come back to the place where ‘everything is taking shape’ is vivid. Rhythm also *redefines* temporality as in conflict with the progressive, classical, sequencing of time, creating a *dialectic*, circular, space of comparison and intersection. According to you, in what sense do these two forms of regression – the anthropological and the rhythmic one – work together?

**Rebecchi:** Eisenstein’s visual work oscillates between ‘metamorphosis’ and ‘regression’, between rhythmic repercussion and the ecstatic transgression of forms. In this way, the montage principle, so close to that of Eisenstein’s films, produces an abundance of ‘formless resemblances’. Eisenstein interpreted these ‘regressive’ qualities of rhythm with the help of different scientific sources: from the ethnology of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl to the poetics and rhyme research of Henry Lanz; from the psychobiological formulations of Ernst Kretschmer to diverse theories of retrogressive evolutionary development.

One can therefore advance the hypothesis that, on the one hand, Eisenstein’s montage theory

took a turn in an 'anthropological' direction after encountering the ethnologist collaborators from *Documents*, and, on the other, Painlevé's films had an influence on Eisenstein's 'protoplasmaticity' theory, which is at the centre of his reflections and writings on Disney.

According to Eisenstein's explication in *Method*, primordial organisms that have not yet reached a stable form find themselves in an open state, capable of assuming any form by means of a series of transformations and metamorphoses, and therefore of taking on any form of animal existence. Mickey Mouse, a quintessential protoplasmic figure, was for Eisenstein an ecstatic character (always beside himself) who embodied the 'plasmaticity' of existence, a figure from whom everything could arise (indistinct society, primordial communism).

What could be in Eisenstein's own terms this *regression* through rhythm? The principle of the rhythmic drum that Eisenstein describes as the '*Urphänomen des Kinos*' is not, however, strictly limited to cinema. Indeed, Eisenstein's own texts – his diaries – follow the same principle.

Eisenstein eventually comes to develop a richly detailed theory of the eye's phylogenetic history, which interprets the sense of touch as a rhythmic perception of contrasts – a play of light and dark. Rhythm, as the most originary and all-encompassing sense, can be conceived in a twofold manner: it is a persistent physiological memory that traverses all sense perceptions on a micro-organic scale (seeing, hearing, smelling, and touching). In situations of danger or extreme bodily exertion, rhythm is reactivated as a support: this regressive experience is what enables a sensuous knowledge of the future –



that means, a prophecy that would be impossible by any other means.

**Mileto:** Your original intention was to focus your research on the study of the *rotary* and *revolutionary* movement of bodies – in particular *faces* – in Eisenstein’s films. This is especially strong in the montage of *tipazh* (texts for extras) of the unfinished film *Bežin Meadow*: we might argue that in this case, the Russian director’s marginal notes shown in the video realised by Elena with the artist Clemens Von Wedemeyer render the ‘status reversal’ of which you speak in your catalogue. Eisenstein ‘moves’ the different figures enlightening their unexpected traits – as in the case of the little girl, about which he writes ‘5 years old – *Marxist*’. Can language have, like cinema, the capacity of removing the fixity and creating a new character taking the *responsibility* of this *motoric* manifestation? And could we refer to this ability of language with the use of rhetoric figures like metaphor or ‘polyphonic structures’, as happens in streams of consciousness?

**Vogman:** The *tipazhes* (texts for extras) of the unfinished film *Bežin Meadow* are aesthetically and politically opposed to criminological photography. Police have long used the ‘mug shot’, a similar double portrait of a person (‘mug’ being an English slang term for ‘face’). These images, by contrast, are not concerned with fixing identities but with creating new ones. Casting images were pasted onto cards, which were then used to select actors with the appropriate physiognomies for *Bežin Meadow*. ‘Tipazh is a social-biological hieroglyph.’ In this

way Eisenstein defined the new type of actor in his 1928 *Manifesto for intellectual montage*: 'he is the most ostensible inscription of a human being. This includes the complexity of their social and individual behavior ... even their motoric manifestations'.<sup>[5]</sup> [#\_edn5] For this reason, tipazh is diametrically opposed to the professional actor. Eisenstein places the tipazh in the foreground of the action. Here he no longer stands for the formless mass. Eisenstein makes him act through the figures of visual history. Memory is revitalised by the energy of embodiment. In this way the cinema is not treated as an isolated universe but as part of an active – and corporeal – history of representation.

This is how the rhythmic pulsation transforms the abstract concept of time into a palpable and sensuous interrelation. In the same way, language is no longer conceived as an abstract formation. Brought into particular constellations, linguistic rhythms resituate the primal image, a gesture, or an act. Eisenstein took a great interest in the work of the philologist and paleolinguist Nikolai Marr (1864-1934). In *Montage* he associates his visits to Marr's lectures with his reading of *Ulysses* – with its multilingualism, its 'polyphony of a single thought', its 'odyssey of a single word', and ultimately a vertically-arranged series of 'heterogeneous contradictory and opposing phenomena'.

**Mileto:** Considering all the drawings hanging on the walls at Nomás, the visitor of the exhibition is struck by *carnality*, *materiality*, and *technical skill*. In particular, the drawing of Veronica's Veil

'photocopied' and even 'autographed' by Christ (as we see in the image), impress on the visitor's memory. Can we say that Eisenstein's artistic choice – which is maybe your own choice in the exhibition – goes to a matter which is cannibalistic in itself and is addressed to a spectator whom the matter should eat, incorporate, turn and 'spit' outside completely transfigured?

**Rebecchi:** Eisenstein shared the transformative materialist conception of form with one of the protagonists of *Documents*: the philosopher and writer Georges Bataille. Like Eisenstein, Bataille understood this materialism as a critical instrument deployed against idealistic and metaphysical notions of matter. The notion of base materialism inspired his focus on the history of gnosis, in which he recognised distinctive 'germs of a bizarre but mortal subversion of the ideal'. In his text *Base Materialism and Gnosticism* (1930), Bataille recovers the core of Gnostic thought in an anti-Hegelian stance: Gnosticism is thus identified as an exaltation of low and impure elements. Eisenstein's anthropological gaze does not only realise a step beyond disciplinary boundaries. It was a more audacious movement beyond his own intellectual, political, and cultural context, exposing himself to his 'epistemic object' with an emphatic closeness verging on identification. This physical contact, including an immanent process of transference and counter-transference, distinctly affected the modes and methods of this anthropology.

'Cannibalism', we read in Eisenstein's Mexican

diary, 'needs to be included in the totality of the imitation (identification) practices.' Whereas the Aristotelian concept of mimesis stresses the distinctness of the imitation from its model, what Eisenstein called the 'cannibalistic' mode of mimesis eliminates all distance between them: it subsumes difference through consumption and transformation. Following this logic, Eisenstein asserts that 'gentle stroking is a punch in slow-motion. (...) Sadism is only a stage in the tempo and intensity of stroking ... devouring remains in love only in the form of a bite and a kiss'.<sup>[6]</sup> [\[#\\_edn6\]](#) In a dimension of transformation and transfiguration, Eisenstein sees it in the light of a principle of 'unlimited' decomposition and 'recomposition' – meaning the endless process of the dynamic reconstruction of a new unit – and of the ancient myth of the original unity of the body of Dionysus and its subsequent dismemberment. In other words, as a prelude to a new and superior 'divine and incorruptible unity in contrast to the mortal and contingent one'.<sup>[7]</sup> [\[#\\_edn7\]](#)

**Mileto:** Filming Mexican religious *processions*  
Eisenstein's camera is placed always at the level of the objects, in order to grasp single details, instead of rendering the 'generalization' of the context. In Eisenstein's conception of social community, bodies are contemplated both together and separately, not mere ornaments of the mass which disappear in the collectivity, but individualities *asserting* themselves, paradoxically, in this new dimension of *sublimation*. Can we say that this apparent paradox is overcome by the necessary processuality implied in the laboratory of forms?

Actually, this processuality leads us to run slowly across the manifold reality and its singularities – ‘art and religion are ecstasy in slow-motion’, Eisenstein writes in his diaries – as the only way to obtain a general synthesis of them.

**Vogman:** Processions of various kinds – religious and profane, political and theatrical, Christian and pagan – recur astonishingly frequently in Eisenstein’s films: the workers leaving the factory in *Strike* (1924); the mourning sequence in the Odessa harbor in *Potemkin* (1925); the Orthodox procession in *The General Line* (1928); the peasants forming a long line to extinguish the fire in *Bezhin Meadow* (1935-1937); the curved line of people in Sloboda, demanding the Tsar’s return to power in *Ivan Grozny* (1945). We experience these images in their corporeal affectivity and the passing of time becomes a rhythmic potential of change. Of the extensive Mexican footage, processions form the largest part. This becomes palpable in Jay Leyda’s study version of the film, which shows the procession as a medium of repetition and transformation. The procession is presented as a process, rather than as an objectified fact. The camera’s eye is located as you said at the level of its object, attending with remarkable patience to the smallest details of its becoming.

In the 1930 issue of *Mexican Folkways* – published shortly before Eisenstein’s arrival in the country – Frances Toor describes the ‘Passion Play at Ixtapalapa’, accompanied by a ‘Note on Penitents’. She refers to the Passion Play of the Virgin of Guadalupe, describing the

penitents 'crawling on their knees for a long distance towards the church'.<sup>[8]</sup> [#\_edn8] Eisenstein would reenact that same Passion Play for a long sequence in his unfinished Mexican film, where penitents reappear with 'their arms so tightly bound to sections of organ cacti, that many of their hands were black from lack of blood circulation'.<sup>[9]</sup> [#\_edn9] This dialectical coexistence of cruelty and sensorial experience – of structural violence and indestructible desire – recurs in Eisenstein's drawings.

Alma Mileto (La Sapienza, Rome)

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[1] [\[#\\_ednref1\]](#) Debord 1996 (orig. in 1956), p. 22.

[2] [\[#\\_ednref2\]](#) Eisenstein, 'The Rhythmic Drum', in Kleiman 2002, pp. 183-193.

[3] [\[#\\_ednref3\]](#) Arendt 1964, p. 42.

[4] [\[#\\_ednref4\]](#) See Bakhtin 1968.

[5] [\[#\\_ednref5\]](#) Eisenstein, IA28, Archive of Gosfilmofond, V/4-11-1, p. 17.

[6] [\[#\\_ednref6\]](#) Eisenstein, Diary 1931, RGALI, 1923-2-1123, p. 97.

[7] [\[#\\_ednref7\]](#) Eisenstein 2000, p. 128.

[8] [\[#\\_ednref8\]](#) Toor 1930, p. 100.

[9] [\[#\\_ednref9\]](#) Hanforth 1930, p. 101.

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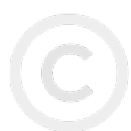
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