Eisenstein and the Challenge of Sound

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Fall 2007 Issue of KINEMA

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Discussion of Eisenstein's theory and practice in the use of sound from his first experiments in the late 1920s to the later refinement of his ideas on audio/visual correspondence in *Alexander Nevsky* (1938) and *Ivan the Terrible* (1944-46) have tended to sideline the former, but both are noteworthy in relation to Eisenstein's first experiments in sound and as a link with the elaboration of his later sound theory and practice is evident in *Nevsky* and *Ivan*.

It is well-known that among the early proponents of sound, the Soviet directors' 'Statement' - a 'wish list freed from practicality'(1) - holds an important place. While opposition to synchronised dialogue was widespread, in the Soviet case there were considerations peculiar to the montage school of filmmakers, as Ian Christie makes clear.(2) By the time of the introduction of synchronised sound, the whole edifice of montage had become linked to the Formalist concept of an automatic activation of 'inner speech' in the film experience; thus, the 'outer speech' of the talkie posed an obvious danger. Not just in terms of an essentially visual art threatened by language, but of the plasticity and allusiveness of inner speech suppressed and replaced by a 'pre-formed, externalised address *from* the screen which would make the spectator little more than a passive eavesdropper.'(3) On a broader level, the addition of speech meant the addition of specific languages, a hindrance to the international traffic in films that had not only bolstered Soviet film's role in the cause of proletarian internationalism but had also made Eisenstein in particular a celebrity.

Read in those terms, the 'Statement' can be seen to be both a cautious welcome for the new 'double-edged invention' of sound cinema and an attempt to relocate the inner speech/montage relationship within the new ensemble. Briefly, the early sound period would require two stages: one of experiment simply with non-synchronised or disjunctive sound/image relationships and a later one with 'orchestral counterpoint'. The latter was never clearly defined, an omission which Pudovkin's cameraman Anatoli Golovnya attributed to an 'imperfect knowledge of sound films'(4) Pudovkin himself continued to argue for a contrapuntal relationship between sound and image, but one that is less dialectical than associational, whose 'first function' would be to 'augment the potential expressiveness of the film's content.'(5)

Eisenstein's writings of the period also suggest that he did not conceive counterpoint as a radical and constant disjunction between sound and image. Eisenstein indeed seems to have offered the most unadulterated welcome for sound of all the montage theorists. He was already looking forward to working with sound 'as a new montage element' while making *The General Line,* which he also considered turning into a sound film with music by Edward Meisel.(6) While these plans ultimately came to naught, the sound script for the film remains, and reveals a highly innovative attempt by Eisenstein to find an auditive equivalent to his visually derived montage. Subsequently, in 1930 while in Paris he opined that the sound film was 'a thing of great interest and the future belongs to it'.(7) Like the other Soviet and European theorists, Eisenstein's main objection was to synchronised speech. Synchronised sound used non-naturalistically was perfectly acceptable; indeed Eisenstein was a great admirer of such usage in the Disney Micky Mouse and *Silly Symphonies* cartoon series. Indeed as a preface to the sound script for *The Old and the New* (the eventual title of the film) Eisenstein has listed *kinds* and *degrees* of sound, among other categories. The three kinds of sound are (1) musical (2) natural surroundings, and (3) animated cartoon. Eisenstein, faced with the problem of matching certain sounds to his rapid montage, wanted to use the quick, often disjunctive sound and visual image relationships of the early sound cartoons to accelerate sounds into at least some proximity of association for certain passages (a synchronicity that re-appears in a number of scenes indebted to Disney in *Alexander Nevsky*). The exaggerated synchronisation of 'animated cartoon sound' found its place in the film in the sequence where the collective's baby bull Fomka grows to full size, in a series of shots constructed much like the awakening stone lion sequence in *Battleship Potemkin:*

> Wedding - 'lyricism' - Negro chorus. Parody on

Fomka's motif with Hawaiian guitar
Growth of Fomka - crescendo of Fomka's leitmotiv.
Choppy. With each jump in Fomka's growth the sound
gets stronger. Without transition. This same figure is
repeated in Fomka's running. There they fuse
The 'Attack' - terrifying increase
Cow spreads her legs - complete pause. Then sound of
Gunfire and an apogee of mooing'.[8]

Eisenstein's second brush with sound was *Romance Sentimentale*, made with Grigori Alexandrov in France in 1930 with the Tobis-Klangfilm system. The director's usual cameraman Eduard Tissé was the cinematographer and music was by Alexis Archangelsky. The film was widely greeted as a debacle, and Eisenstein subsequently distanced himself from its production, but not before pointing out in a letter to Léon Moussinac in the same year that 'In any case, we got what we wanted from the movie: we made some *very valuable* montage experiments and ... we had enough money to stay in Paris until the transatlantic journey.'[9] The film itself combines a visual style which is heavily indebted to French avant-garde practice of the 1920s: rapid cutting, canted framings, both rolling and static upside-down shots, blurred and distorted visuals, and superimpositions, with a disjunctive use of sound and music. It opens on a blank screen accompanied by an aural mélange of unidentifiable sounds - created, according to one source, by running the soundtrack backwards or using 'drawn sound' that is, inscribing graphic figures such as letters, lines and profiles onto the soundtrack of the film and then playing it back through the projector.[10] This technique of 'drawn sound' in fact had already been used on the soundtrack of Abram Room's *The Plan for Great Works,* released in March 1930 and credited with being the first Soviet sound film, and no doubt familiar to Alexandrov and Eisenstein.

This is succeeded by an extended fast-cut passage of waves, clouds and leafless trees, with accompanying stirring orchestral accompaniment. The combination of camera tricks, cutting and music paves the way for the only narrative action of the film, a woman (Mara Giry) singing a sad Russian love song while accompanying herself on piano, punctuated by bursts of sentimental orchestral accompaniment. The most interesting feature of the soundtrack comes some minutes later, when a succession of rapid close-ups of the woman and a Rodin statue are displaced by starbursts of light and bursts of 'raw' sound, including a clashing of cymbals. This long abstract passage, while an obvious attempt to convey a tonal effect of emotion and pathos through a combination of sound and visuals, in Eisensteinian terms, is also strikingly similar to the synchronised sound experiments of Oskar Fischinger and others in abstract animation, which pre-dated and in the case of Fischinger directly influenced the Disney studios' practice. Oddly, Eisenstein at no point in his writings ever made mention of these European experiments in abstract 'visual music', despite having begun to theorise along those lines in 1929 in the 'The Fourth Dimension in Cinema', and later describing Disney's 'Skeleton Dance' as a 'masterpiece of the moving equivalent of music'.[11]

'The Fourth Dimension in Cinema' expressed his theory of 'overtonal montage' in terms of an analogy with music. In the same way that the acoustical properties of instrumental music produce, along with the dominant tone, a whole series of overtones and undertones, so also, he reasoned, optical distortions can be used to produce a series of calculated compositional effects. This was a revision of an earlier idea as expounded in'An Unexpected Juncture' (1928) that the contrapuntal method of combining sound and visual image would require the reducing of visual and sound perceptions to a new denominator. Sound and visual perceptions are not in fact reducible to a single denominator he concludes, but are 'constants in different dimensions'. The visual and sound overtones on the other hand are constants in a single dimension, because 'while a shot is a visual perception and a tone is a sound perception, *both visual and sound overtones are totally physiological sensations .. of one and the same kind'.*[12] The heightened nervous tension that results supercedes simple seeing and hearing, an elaboration of the 'montage of attractions' that incorporates the contrapuntal conflict between the visual and sound overtones and that for Eisenstein will form the basis of the Soviet sound film.

Eisenstein's sojourn in Europe, the United States and Mexico between 1929 and 1932, however, meant that the first work in the Soviet sound film was carried out in his absence by, most notably, the heterogenous experiments in counterpoint and asynchronism demonstrated in films by major directors such as Pudovkin,

Vertov, Barnet and others.[13] The director's period in the United States, motivated by an invitation from Paramount Studios, was to result only in a number of aborted projects, in particular *Sutter's Gold* and *An American Tragedy.* The story for the former, based on a novel by Blaise Cendrars, was adapted by Eisenstein, Alexandrov and Ivor Montagu to portray the Gold Rush of 1849 and was to have been a 'tragedy of individualism'.[14] The scenario sketches out details for a 'noise symphony'[15], which, with its constant exaggerated sounds and booming voices, would provide a sonic counterpoint to the scenes of the scenes of men driven mad by gold lust. In the event, Paramount's fears that the film would be too expensive led to the project being abandoned. A proposed adaptation of Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*, which similarly came to naught, is notable for experiments with subjective sound, in the form of an inner monologue leading up to the death of Roberta, the factory girl whom Clyde has made pregnant. This is a demonstration of Eisenstein's attempt to accommodate the spoken word - the danger most urgently signalled in the 'Statement' - inspired in part by a meeting with James Joyce in Paris after which he came to the conclusion that 'the material of the sound-film is not dialogue. The true material of the sound film is, of course, the monologue'.[16] In the sequence of the film where Clyde and Roberta go boating on a lake,[17] Clyde is tormented by two opposing inner voices, whose dual urging 'ripple in the waves that lap from the oars against the boat; they whisper in the beating of his heart; they comment, underscoring, upon the memories and alarums that pass through his mind'.[18] This interior monologue expands to a chorus of conflicting voices, which, counterpointed by a swift succession of images, rise to a crescendo of 'Kill - kill -', the sound of the voice resonating on the soundtrack in a manner that recalls Hitchcock's innovative but less sophisticated use of sound in the 'Knife' sequence of *Blackmail* (1929).

Rescued from failure in Hollywood by a project financed by the novelist Upton Sinclair, the resulting *¡Que viva Mexico!* (1931), was the one film in which Eisenstein was ever to have a completely free hand. Not surprisingly, perhaps, this 'poem of love, death and immortality'[19] ran into budget problems and was to remain unfinished until 1979, when Alexandrov, referring to Eisenstein's extensive notes and sketches, assembled the most definite version of the film.[20] While the film's visuals have an extraordinary lyrical beauty, the *sound* as reconstructed bears very little resemblance to Eisenstein's most detailed scenario for the film, written in 1947 for inclusion in the planned publication in French of his writings and scenarios.[21] As one might expect, there are very few examples of speech or dialogue in the scenario. Most of the text is descriptive, and suggests two main sources of sound: music which derives organically from the events which occur, and noise or sound effects, which have a similarly direct relationship to what is happening. Both of these types of sound are of equal aural value. Eisenstein aimed to use a symphonic form which would structure the film into four highly contrasting narratives, akin to symphonic movements, framed by a prologue and an epilogue. David Alfaro Siqueiro's mural 'The Burial of the Worker' was used as a visual starting point for the prologue, which was to show the links between past and present and the depth of Mayan heritage in Mexican culture. Similarly, José Guadalupe Posada's prints inspired the satirical epilogue which presented the achievements of modern Mexico overlaid by the celebrations of the Day of the Dead, when laughing children wear skeleton masks and capitalists are shown to be the 'living dead'.

Like a classical symphonic structure, the episodes are formally self-contained, though they are linked by certain recurring elements. In addition, each of the six episodes was to feature a different folk song. Eisenstein's concern was to form a symphonic unity of the 'songs, legends, tales from different parts of Mexico' which would bring together these different parts into 'one unified cinematic work', a 'Film-Symphony'[22] representing the varied landscapes of Mexico, its variety of inhabitants, and its correspondingly extensive range of musical styles . In Alexandrov's version of the film, the prologue has been given a voice-over by Sergei Bondarchuk which sets the scene of the action, an unremarkable device in standard documentary practice but which here signals a conventionalisation of Eisenstein's ideas for the film. The saccharine music that punctuates the following episodes is of a similarly hackneyed nature, with only a number of ironic uses of counterpart to dramatic scenes and exaggerated sound effects to remind us of Eisenstein's original ambitious plan.[23]

While Eisenstein attempted various realisations of this idea of a 'symphonic unity' in the following years, including his plans for *Bezhin Meadow* (1935), it would, however, be a number of years before Eisenstein had any serious engagement with sound film production after his return to the Soviet Union in 1932. He had left as the undisputed 'master', but Eisenstein had been abroad at a crucial period of transformation.

He returned to a country and a cinema in the throes of the cultural revolution that accompanied the first Five-Year plan. The experiments which had characterised the earlier response to the new regime of sound cinema were now to give way to demands for a cinematic practice that would be 'intelligible to the millions'. After a desperate period in the early and mid-thirties when Eisenstein attempted to mount a resistance to the new order, including the humiliation of *Bezhin Meadow*, his response in theory was elaborated in 1937-40, with his essays on montage, and in practice in his historical epics *Alexander Nevsky* and *Ivan the Terrible*, films that belonged, at least in broad outline, to the cycle of mainstream historical spectacles that emerged in the late 1930s, largely in response to Stalin's message to the 1935 film workers' conference: 'Soviet power expects from you new successes, new films which, like *Chapayev,* will glorify the grandeur of the historical exploits of the workers and peasants of the Soviet Union in their struggle for power'.[(24)] Eisenstein chose the story of the former because there was little documentary evidence available on the 13th century hero who had repulsed Livonian and Teutonic invaders, a factor that would enable him to work the material as much as possible to his own ends, and because it also had clear contemporary resonance. Although *Ivan the Terrible* had a much more troubled production history, both films were opportunities for the director to put into practice many of his pedagogical ideas on audio-visual synthesis.

The films can be seen as efforts to work through the official Socialist Realist style towards something more authentic and powerful - even 'ecstatic' - a response that in Eisenstein's view would close the gap between perceiver and perceived. Both explore and expand the concepts of expressive movement worked out in Eisenstein's directing classes at VGIK: acting becomes 'hyperbolic and hieratic, yielding statuesque staging in *Nevsky* and baroque contortions in *Ivan*'.[(25)] In both, also, music plays a central role in creating a complex interplay of visual and auditory lines that Eisenstein considered necessary for the organic unity of the work. He elaborated on these ideas in the 1938 essay 'Vertical Montage', where he delineates his concept of an 'audio-visual score' with a vertical, or harmonic correspondence on the one hand, and a horizontal, melodic, contrapuntal composition on the other. Music, sound effects and visuals would be sensed as a composite, with what he theorised as the gestural elements of both music and visuals creating an effect of 'double exposure', or visual carry-over of horizontal movement from one shot to the next. One could argue that the idea of counterparting music and visual gesture can also be related to Eisenstein's appropriation of Japanese culture within the context of montage cinema, and in particular, the juncture he noted between Kabuki theatre and sound cinema as early as 1928. Kabuki theatre, he argued, operated through a *monistic ensemble* where 'sound, movement, space and voice *do not accompany* (or even parallel) one another but are treated as *equivalent elements*'. [(26)] Instead of simple *accompaniment* Kabuki theatre thus "reveals the method of transference: the transference of the basic affective intention from one material to another, from one category of 'stimulant to another'"[(27)].

Working with the composer Prokofiev was critical in the achievement of these aims. In early 1938 the latter had visited Hollywood, where he investigated film scoring techniques, especially those of Disney, whose close synchronisation of music and action fascinated him, particularly in the newly-released *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Prokofiev was Walt Disney's guest when he visited the Disney studios in early March, subsequently writing to his sons, 'Today I have been to the house of Mickey Mouse's papa'.[(28)] The experiments he witnessed at the Disney studios were to be of crucial importance in his subsequent realisation of musical scores for Eisenstein's films that in the director's estimation were 'amazingly plastic ... (and were) never content to remain an illustration, but everywhere, gleaming with triumphant imagery .. wonderfully reveals the inner movement of the phenomenon and its dynamic structure, in which is embodied the emotion and meaning of an event'.[(29)]

On *Alexander Nevsky*, Prokofiev was involved in all aspects of the film's production. In discussing his efforts to find a method of setting up 'vertical' or simultaneous correspondences between musical and pictorial sequences, Eisenstein theorised that it did not matter whether the music was written before or after the filmed sequences; in *Alexander Nevsky*, he noted:

> literally every possible combination of these methods is to be found. There are scenes in which the pictures were edited in accordance with music pre-recorded on the soundtrack. There are scenes where the music was entirely written to fit a fully completed visual montage; and there are scenes in which every available intermediate method was used. Finally, there are also some cases that have become almost legendary, such as, for instance, the scene with the pipes and tabors

> played by the Russian troops: I was totally unable to explain in detail to Sergei Prokofiev exactly what I wanted to 'see' in sound for that scene. Finally ... I ordered up a selection of appropriate property instruments (i.e. soundless ones) and made the actors visually 'play' on them what I wanted; I filmed them doing this, showed it to Prokofiev and ... almost instantly he produced for me an exact 'musical equivalent' of the visual image of those pipers and drummers which I had shown him.

... Similarly, in a number of instances pre-recorded pieces of music sometimes prompted us to find graphically expressive solutions which neither he nor I had foreseen. Many of these coincided so well with the 'inner resonance' linking music and pictures that they now seem to have been the most carefully 'pre-arranged' combinations (for instance, the scene in which Vaska and Gavrila Oleksich embrace each other in farewell, which was quite unexpectedly set against the complex musical theme of the galloping knights, and so on).

Notes

1. Kahn, Douglas. *Noise Water Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts.* Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2001:41.

2. Christie, Ian. 'Soviet Cinema: Making Sense of Sound', *Wide Angle* 15.1 (1993): 37.

3. Christie, op. cit: 38.

4. Interview with Sergei Gerasimov, in *Cinema in Revolution*, ed Luda and Jean Schnitzer, Marcel Martin, 1966; trans and ed David Robinson, London: Secker and Warburg, 1973:117.

5. Pudovkin, 'Asynchronism As A Principle of Sound Film', in Pudovkin, Vsevolod. *Film Technique and Film Acting.* London: Vision, 1954:184.

6. Christie, 1993: 41.

7. Eisenstein, 'Les principes du nouveau cinema russe' (April 1930) quoted in Thompson, Kristen, 'Early Sound Counterpoint' in Altman, Rick (Ed), *Yale French Studies.* 60.1 1980:118.

8. Leyda, Jay and Zina Voynov, *Eisenstein at Work.* New York: Panthem Books and the Museum of Modern Art: 38.

9. Italics Eisenstein's, Kahn, 2001:153.

10. See discussion between Alexandrov and the American film critic Harry Potamkin, in Kahn, 2001:153.

11. Eisenstein, Sergei, *Nonindifferent Nature*, trans. Herbert Marshall. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987: 389.

12. Ibid.

13. See Thompson, Kristen, 'Early Sound Counterpoint' *Yale French Studies* 60.1 (1980):115-140 for a detailed analysis of these.

14. Naum Kleiman, in Bordwell, David*, The Cinema of Eisenstein.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988: 17.

15. 'A Sequence for *Sutter's Gold*' in *The Film Sense* (ed. and trans. Jay Leyda). London: faber and faber, 1986: 195.

16. In Christie, op. cit: 40.

17. See 'A Sequence from *An American Tragedy'* in *The Film Sense*, op. cit: 186-190.

18. Op. cit: 187.

19. In Karetnikova, Inga and Steinmetz, Leon. *Mexico according to Eisenstein.* Albuquerque: University of

New Mexico Press, 1991:28.

20. Anne Nesbet gives an admirably lucid account of the complex fate of the film's footage in *Savage Junctures.* London: I. B. Tauris, 2003: 149-150. Briefly, Upton Sinclair handed over the seized footage to producer Sol Lesser in 1933 who assembled a film entitled *Thunder over Mexico* based on Eisenstein's Maguey episode. In 1934, Lesser put together both a short film called *Death Day* followed by a series of educational shorts carved from various segments of the Mexican footage. In 1939 Marie Seton, Eisenstein's biographer, put together a version of the film based on her interpretation of Eisenstein's plans for it which she called *Time in the Sun.* Upon Eisenstein's death, Upton Sinclair eventually donated the footage to the Museum of Modern Art in New York, from whence it eventually travelled back to Moscow where Gregori Alexandrov undertook the construction of the most definitive version of the film in 1979, a version which is now available a Kino International DVD.

21. See Seton, Marie. *Sergei Eisenstein: A Biography.* London: Denis Dobson, 1978: 504.

22. Karetnikova, op. cit: 37.

23. See Robertson, Robert, 'Eisenstein's Film Symphony Project, Que viva Mexico! Part 2: Music', http://www. offscreen.com/biblio/phile/essays/mexico_ pt2/ for an extensive discussion of Eisenstein's sonic ideas for the film, based on the detailed scenario to be found in Karetnikova, op cit,: 35-138.

24. In Bordwell, op. cit: 204.

25. Bordwell: 206.

26. Eisenstein, 'An Unexpected Juncture' (1928), *S. M Eisenstein: Selected Works Vol. 1* (ed) Richard Taylor. London: BFI Publishing, 1988: 117.

27. Op. cit: 118.

28. Quoted in Merritt, Russell, 'Recharging Alexander Nevsky: Tracking the Eisenstein-Prokofiev War Horse'. *Film Quarterly* 48.2 (1994): 42.

29. Eisenstein, 'P-R-K-V-F', *Notes of a Film Director.* Trans. X Dranko, Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1946: 163.

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