

Antonio Somaini. *Ejzenštejn. Il cinema, le arti, il montaggio*

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When Tom Gunning uses the term *cinema of attractions* to define early cinema, which gives priority to showing a cinematographic event rather than its narrative, he shines a light on the past and present of film history. Gunning's theory, which significantly bears a resemblance to Sergei Eisenstein's *montage of attractions*, enables us to reinterpret the early years of the filmmaker, understood as his own model of representation and not as an intermediate stage in the institutionalisation of cinema as a storytelling medium. Curiously enough, the process of mutation cinema has experienced, and is experiencing, through digital technology, has enabled Gunning and other authors to draw a diagonal line between contemporary blockbusters and the spectacular devices of early cinema. In both cases, the visual impact attracts the viewer's attention, and cinematographic forms become the carriers of the discourse of the great spectacle, whose greatest exponent is the sensory experience of the roller coaster. The evolution of cinema is built by going back to its origins.

There is something Eisensteinesque behind Gunning's gesture of rewriting the central theory to Eisenstein's montages in the light of other times and forms. Throughout his artistic and intellectual career, the fulcrum of the Russian filmmaker's thought consisted of looking back to the past as a device for understanding the present. Although he was a child of the revolution, this dialectical approach runs through his extensive

theoretical *corpus*, where the traces of the past guide us from the present to the future. The past is presented as something to be rediscovered and not as something to be destroyed. This temporal equation is the first major evidence revealed in Sergei Eisenstein's intellectual biography that Antonio Somaini pieces together in great detail and with great rigour in his *Ejzenštejn. Il cinema, le arti, il montaggio*. The Russian director's ideas, which are disseminated through a wide variety of articles and books, spanning the early 1920s to 1948 (the year he died), resemble multiple fragments of a line of thought which Somaini knows how to *edit* with keen-edged clarity. The book is arguably one of the finest reappraisals of Eisenstein's ideas to date.

The binomial of making films and thinking films is not Eisenstein's sole domain but one of the great paradigms of the 20th century. Epstein, Vertov, Delluc, L'Herbier, Pudovkin and Léger are some of the names that convert cinematographic practice into a laboratory experimenting with different ideas and postulates about the cinema. In this regard, we can state that Somaini's book puts in order all the notes from Eisenstein's laboratory. A laboratory where errors, failed projects and even the most (seemingly) banal details may have as much importance as the filmmaker's successes. There is no distinction between large and small forms; rather the notes and sketches contain the potential wisdom of the images. Somaini is aware of this and through this eminently

Benjaminian approach he finds new ways of interpreting Eisenstein's entire body of work in the more peripheral and residual forms. Thus, for instance, in the series of Eisenstein's unpublished drawings depicting the scene in *Macbeth* where King Duncan is killed, we find framings and compositional approaches that reappear in the sublime battle on the ice in *Alexander Nevsky* (1938).

Throughout the different chapters, Somaini shows how the Eisensteinesque forms arise from this ongoing work in progress. Hence the chronological approach is fundamental to the structure of the book, as we see in detail how the ideas came about and grew (returning and disappearing depending on the context), and at the same time we see how, almost rhizomatically, these ideas embrace, engage in a dialogue with, or run counter to the approaches of the other great contemporary thinkers of his day: Aby Warburg, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Georges Bataille, André Malraux and Siegfried Kracauer. This cross-cutting approach and interdisciplinarity underpin the entire text, and are contained in the subtitle of the book: "cinema, the arts and montage". As if it were a sequence from Kuleshov's laboratory, these three concepts are interwoven in the book just as they are interwoven in Eisenstein's thought, where the cinematographic problems were studied in relation to the other arts and always resolved by the montage process. Somaini traces Eisenstein's intellectual path by showing us the multitude of junctions and branches that can open before us.

In this regard, the fact that Eisenstein's famous *montage of attractions* theory stemmed from the actor's gesture—as the author points out in the opening chapters of the book—is particularly interesting. The filmmaker discovered the importance of the expressiveness of actors during his experience with avant-garde theatre under the great director and actor Meyerhold. At the time, expressiveness was associated with biomechanics as a reflection of the industrialisation of soviet society. Through Meyerhold's teachings, Eisenstein found the starting point for his great theory of forms based on the expressiveness of the work of art. The virtue of the book lies in the fact that it documents with extreme rigour the evolution of Eisenstein's ideas to the extent that we see how a theatrical gesture has become transfigured into one of the most important cinematographic forms of the 20th century. The line of thought that runs through the book is so smooth that we can gain an insight into the present without any fear, and strengthens the parallels drawn at the beginning with Tom Gunning's theories.

In view of the changes that have affected cinema since the digital revolution of the late 20th century, the work carried out by Antonio Somaini in this book doesn't seem random or banal, in fact quite the contrary. On this long crossing over unknown territories, the light emanating from one of the beacons of the cinema, from one of the greatest creators and thinkers of cinematic forms, is indispensable when thinking about cinema today. •

Translated from Spanish by Mark Waudby