



## Elena Vogman: *Sinnliches Denken – Eisensteins exzentrische Methode*

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### Keywords

Sergei Eisenstein; Johann Wolfgang von Goethe; Jean d'Udine; Gilles Deleuze; Félix Guattari; Rudolf von Laban; sensuous thinking; rhythm; montage; anthropology; eccentricism; gesture.

Sensuous thinking creates a specific correlation between thought and material. It could be grasped as a material realm that thinks and as thinking that retrieves its movement in the materiality of things. The realms of thinking and movement are interconnected through a never-ending process of conditionality, affect, and transformation [...].

(Vogman 2018: 15)<sup>1</sup>

Elena Vogman embarks on a bold and arduous journey by engaging with Sergei Eisenstein's ambitious unfinished project *Method / Grundproblem*. Her monograph *Sinnliches Denken – Eisensteins exzentrische Methode* [Sensuous Thinking. Eisenstein's Eccentric Method] (Diaphanes, 2018), a meticulous and attentive interpretation of Eisenstein's work, is based on her Tibertius Award-winning dissertation, completed at the Peter Szondi Institute at the Free University of Berlin. *Sinnliches Denken* summarises Vogman's careful research, delving deep into Eisenstein's Archives, and including a comprehensive list of secondary literature with special attention paid to two different editions of Eisenstein's *Method*: by Naum Kleiman (2002) and Oksana Bulgakowa (2008). Vogman's is the first German-language monograph on Eisenstein's *Grundproblem*. Her specific approach lies in her attempt to acknowledge and connect the philosophical, anthropological, epistemological, and aesthetic perspectives in Eisenstein's work reaching well beyond his film theory. Through Vogman's analysis, *Method* enfolds as a transdisciplinary epistemology of art and brings together the intelligible and sensible into a "sensuous thinking".

Eisenstein imagined his work in the form of a spherical book in which all elements are interrelated in a non-linear entanglement. The project attempted to cover an interdisciplinary genesis of the general history of visual culture<sup>2</sup> and proposed a unified theory of art connecting various disciplines such as Anthropology, Aesthetics, Psychoanalysis, Gestalt Psychology, Paleontology, and Linguistics. The boundless and associative connection between visual form and abstract idea brings this project into the proximity of Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas* [Bilderatlas Mnemosyne] (1928) and Gyorgy Kepes' *Language of Vision* (1995). *Method*, Eisenstein's opus magnum, begun in 1931 in Mexico and continued in Moscow and Alma-Ata in the 1940s (Vassilieva 2006). However, he failed to complete it and left a vast amount of unfinished and fragmentary manuscripts, a polyphonic collection of fragments in the form of notes, letters, sketches, and diary entries.



In her book, Elena Vogman maps out a carefully considered overlay that makes lines of historical, aesthetic, and theoretical convergences visible. In so doing, her text unfolds a possible way of reading *Method*, a temporal hold that crystallises ideas relevant for the main concept of sensuous thinking. Instead of a descriptive approach Vogman enacts Eisenstein's "Grundproblem", the inseparable dynamic between abstract thought and the radical physicality of things, by applying a framework of five conceptual aspects onto the open texture of his work. These facets illuminate Eisenstein's research from different and yet interconnected angles and build the core of the five chapters of the book as follows: "Eccentric Thinking"; "Concrete Thinking"; "Gesture, Expression, Synesthesia"; "Gesture, Geometrisation, Sensuous Abstraction"; "Rhythmic Thinking". The chapters span an arch between eccentric and rhythmic thinking by weaving together theoretical reflections with the close reading of specific case studies from Eisenstein's book.

How do senses relate to the experience of thought? How does their relationship find expression in images; images that both contain traces and act as pathways of the thought and sensuous experience? (Vogman 2018: 7)

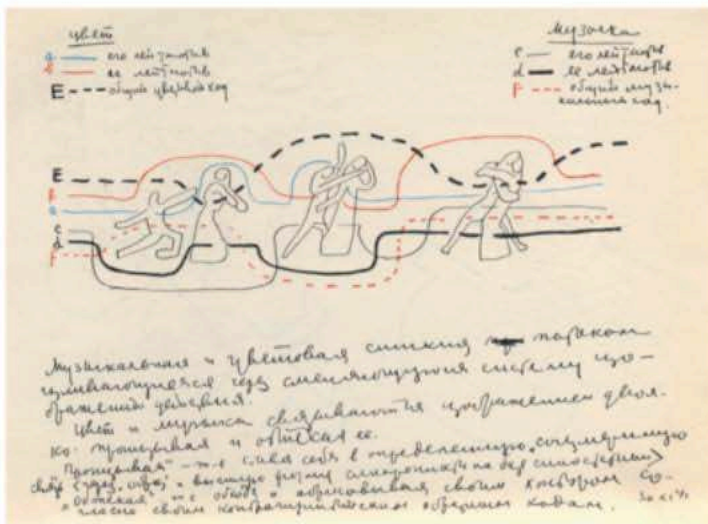
In Eisenstein's vision of art theory as an entanglement of dispersed concepts from various fields, "eccentric thinking" is the organisational force that defers elements from their common hierarchical structures and re-arranges them in a dynamic and open relationship. Eccentricism ties back to the avant-garde artistic movement in the Soviet Union, which rejected traditional theatrical acting, instead aiming for rather physical and sometimes shocking stunts originating from the circus and other popular entertainments. Vogman examines the term "eccentric thinking" in the historical context of the avant-garde between the formalist material poetics and the cinematic idea of the interval. In both, the focus falls on the organisational force of the in-betweenness in its spatial (in formalist poetics) and temporal (in film) aspects. As Vogman points out, the idea of montage becomes a foundational principle in Eisenstein's work (Vogman 2018: 55).

Looking at the relationship between abstraction and embodied perception, Eisenstein was attracted by Goethe's concept of "concrete thinking" [Gegenständliches Denken] developed in the context of morphology. Goethe and Eisenstein were both interested in the tangible and physical aspect of epistemology which would not have directly negated the Cartesian dualistic worldview but could have offered an alternative to purely abstract categories by making aesthetic relationships experiential through senses. Goethe, being a polymath, developed theories of colour and plant development by engaging in an alternative way of knowing that involves the observer's empirical engagement with the observed object. This epistemology of concrete phenomena focuses on the process of perception gathering direct knowledge of the world by using sensory (prevalently visual) information.

In the following chapters, Vogman elaborates on various aspects of the physical realisation of thought experienced through senses. "Like the concave and convex surface of an imprint arising from a touch and preserving its trace, visuality implies a genuine coexistence of image and gesture" (ibid.: 187). The experience based on the subject's gaze creates a so-called imprint. It is a material realisation of the trajectory of thinking that can be visualised. Eisenstein investigates correlations between gesture, image, and imprint in a cycle of drawings created in 1945. He argues for the immanent relationship between knowing and touching, image and body and does this both in his writing and series of sketches. The adjective "sensuous" Eisenstein uses to characterise the specificity of this embodied thinking deriving from the Russian word 'čuvstvo' which refers both to perceptual sensing and emotional cognition (ibid. 187). The gesture of reaching becomes twofold: it is simultaneously a physical and cognitive act. This double meaning is well rendered in the German word '(be)greifen' meaning both to grasp and to reach. The epistemology of the reaching gesture enfolds both on a physical-experiential and cognitive-abstract plane. Eisenstein disassembles this gesture to model how space has been experienced in a cognitive, emotional, and sensuous way.

Vogman interprets Eisenstein's ideas about how the body's expressive movement transposes into a sensuous "language" of the material by reference to the theory of gesture by Jean d'Udine, the works of the language paleontologist Nikolai Marr, and examples from Eisenstein's staging of Wagner's *Die Walküre / The Valkyrie*. Eisenstein's interest in d'Udine's book *L'art et le geste* (1910) was provoked by the idea that an artwork expresses the emotion of the artist, on the one hand, and elicits an emotional response in the viewer, on the other hand. D'Udine sees the possibility of this transposition in the expressive potential of the gesture.





**Fig.** Sergei Eisenstein, “Colour and music are interconnected by the image in two ways; they permeate and surround the image at the same time.” (Sergei Eisenstein, manuscript, 1945, Muzei Kino, Eisenstein-cabinet; cit. in Vogman 2018: 244).<sup>3</sup>

On his part, Eisenstein is interested in the synaesthetic potential of the gesture that transposes and enacts different senses into an embodied epistemology. In this context, Eisenstein calls into attention works of Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Balzac, and Schlegel; the visual rhythm and onomatopoeic words used by Maiakovskii in his poetry; and the creative potential of the musical instrument Theremin that translates gestures into acoustic impulses. In Eisenstein’s method, the idea of synaesthesia overlaps with the idea of vertical montage, which Eisenstein introduces at the advent of sound and colour film. Vertical montage points here to the emergent configurations between sound and various elements of the image (such as colour, movement or camera angle) that exist on vertical, simultaneous axes while montage deals with the juxtapositions arising from the succession of moving images. As Eisenstein argues, it can be understood as an all-encompassing embodied epistemology applicable not only in the context of artistic production but in the context of social and political reality as well.

As the general direction of Eisenstein’s work was to create an adequate form of theory that itself would be embodied, the interest in the abstract visual representation of movement as an expressive gesture was central in his work. Working through various examples, Eisenstein argues that the visualisation of movement as its fixation in time and space does not dissipate but rather intensifies the sensuous. Vogman follows up on Eisenstein’s attempt to create a notation system of expressive movement. His initial basis was Meyerhold’s biomechanics, an acting system developed in opposition to naturalistic theatre tradition, where the creation of a specific gestural construction would be able to transmit certain emotional states between the actor and the viewer. The goal of the notation was to trace the expression of the actor on a gestural, mimetic, and intonational level. Among his first attempts was the invention of a "spherical coordinate system" inspired by Rudolf von Laban’s dance notation. Laban’s understanding of the spatial structure of movement and body alignment was of particular importance: the process of movement inscribes a diagram into a three-dimensional geometric construction (ibid.: 260).<sup>4</sup>

In Eisenstein, the sphere or the circle functions as an epistemological model that produces a dialectical image. The goal of the transposition of gestures from one medium to another, either visual or auditory, is to find ways to experience and measure expressivity. Moreover, the transposition has the potential to indicate the underlying dialectic of the gesture by visualising its rhythmical changes. Eisenstein’s central term in this regard is ‘disfigurement [Entstellung] – a dynamic distortion of certain formal elements expressing rhythmical change.

The connection of experience, thinking, and place transforms rhythm into a qualitative category based on intensity: rhythm is a formal tool and a medium that correlates between elementary phenomena of perception, movement of thinking, and memory. (ibid.: 335)



In the last chapter, Vogman lays out the theories and influences that constitute and contextualise Eisenstein's understanding of rhythm and which are specifically related to the visual realm. The concept of rhythm goes back to the idea of sensuous thinking and at the same time offers a theoretical scaffolding to connect the multitude of artifacts and ideas in *Method*. In Vogman's interpretation, the concept of rhythm is offered rather as a compositional force in the context of a work in progress. Vogman compares Eisenstein's interest in the structurally open configuration of ideas which can be re-read and complemented, with Deleuze and Guattari's post-structuralist assemblage. Rhythm is seen as a formal tool that carries the potential of metamorphosis instead of a mechanistic conjunction of oppositions. Eisenstein argues that rhythmic thinking can be seen as a sixth sense, a primordial embodied memory that bridges the conscious and the unconscious; rhythmic thinking maps time onto space by activating kinaesthetic intuition. In that sense, rhythm being "cinema's ur-phenomenon" creates a perfect platform for expressive transposition of the felt experience into moving images.

Elena Vogman offers an extremely thorough and rich theoretical investigation into Eisenstein's late theory. Her work, the first of its kind, initiates a precise incision along concepts such as eccentricism, expressivity, gesture, transposition, dynamism, and rhythm that find their meaning and function in the context of sensuous thinking, an embodied understanding of both artistic production and art theory reflection. In a captivating manner, Vogman weaves together close readings of specific excerpts from Eisenstein's *Method*, supported by historical and theoretical contextualisation from various disciplines. Her sense for the detail of the artifact can be traced back to her curatorial work on

Eisenstein.<sup>5</sup> Vogman's monograph successfully shifts the common image of Eisenstein's theoretical work from a constructivist one, based on his widely known works on cinema, to a transdisciplinary sensuous theory of art (Vassilieva 2010). Moreover, Vogman situates Eisenstein's work in the context of post-structuralist theory of Deleuze and Guattari emphasising its processual character and open structure where concepts such as montage and rhythm become rather tools to unsettle existing hierarchies.

This aspect of her work makes it particularly intriguing not only to cinema and media studies scholars, but also to a wider readership of scholars interested in aesthetics and art history in the context of sensuous knowledge.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> All quotes from Elena Vogman's book have been translated by the author of this review.

<sup>2</sup> A parallel could be drawn to another work of Eisenstein, *Notes for a General History of Cinema*. As Naum Kleiman states in the foreword, this work "called for an overview of the many centuries of the development of world culture (including science, technology, and the arts) and at the same time demanded taking into account the laws of human perception." (Eisenstein, Kleiman Somaini 2016: 14)

<sup>3</sup> In the context of synaesthesia Vogman highlights Eisenstein's idea of the gesture of the artwork. The synaesthetic correlation of various aesthetic expressions (in this image – lines following colour and music, broken down respectively to his, hers and a combined trajectory) brings forth the gesture of the artwork that has the potential of affective and emotional impact on the viewer.

<sup>4</sup> Cited by Elena Vogman from Rudolf von Laban, *Choreographie*, Jena 1926, S. 2–3.

<sup>5</sup> Based on her research of the archival materials of Eisenstein's planned adaptation of Karl Marx's *Capital*, Vogman published both a book (*Dance of Values. Sergei Eisenstein's Capital Project*, Diaphanes, 2019) and, together with Marie Rebecchi, curated an exhibition *Le supermarché des images* at the gallery Jeu de Paume in Paris (11.02-07.06.2020). The exhibition was followed by a publication *Sergei Eisenstein and the Anthropology of Rhythm* (2017). See also Jovanovic 2019.