

Theory as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*

In 1935 Sergey Eisenstein began work on a film project that portrayed collectivisation as an archaic drama: a fourteen-year old boy denounces his father to the GPU and is murdered by him. E. believed that through his art and a superior visual culture he could ennoble this sordid and bloody tale of *Bezbin Meadow*, which was based on a real event. The layers of this culture (impressionism, Japanese graphic art, Spanish and Dutch painting) would take the story out of contemporary discourse and current affairs and project it into a mythological dimension. E. conceptualised this “Kolkhoz film” as the oedipal revolt of the son and ritual revenge of the father, who tried to take the ties of blood and kinship away from the claims of the state and in this way to save his tribe.

The Central Committee stepped in and stopped this “pathological production”. It denounced the project as “anti-artistic” and “politically misguided”. Critics saw the roots of E.’s error in his theory, in his questionable preoccupation with myths, and his enthusiasm for the pre-logical linguistic structure of the inner monologue. Allegedly, this led E. to anthropomorphise nature and interpret a clear case of class struggle as an ancient Greek tragedy in the spirit of Nietzsche; as a mystery play with chorus and mythological characters, who bow to irrational destiny: “Nietzsche, Lévy-Bruhl, and Joyce are no help to a Soviet artist.”<sup>1</sup> E. confessed that he put too much trust in his spontaneity and creativity, which—because these are undisciplined, subjective, and anarchic—led him to make incorrect generalisations. He condemned his own individualism, which he classified as pathological, and characterised his experiments with unusual image compositions, mood lighting, camera angles, static shots, and masks instead of realistic characters as *degenerate*.<sup>2</sup>

The criticised theoretical model, which Eisenstein was developing during this period in the book *Method*, should offer a psychological-aesthetic explanation why archaic pre-logical thinking would determine artistic processes. In this sense E.’s theoretical project can be viewed within the same paradigm. Moreover, in a certain regard it provides an overarching framework for the bond

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1 Oshibki Bezhina Luga, *Protiv formalizma v kino* (Moscow, 1937), p. 50. All translations from Russian and German are mine unless otherwise stated.

2 Article in the newspaper *Kino*, 24. 3. 1937.