
title:
Striking Factory and Strike of Consciousness in the Work of S. M. Eisenstein

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The Soviet Union of the 1920s produces and supports multiple connections between the organization of work in factories and research in collective physiology, reflexology and the biomechanics of labour. The biomechanics of movement was not only an aesthetic vector or style of motion, but also a new form of knowledge operating through embodiment. In laboratories of gesture, scientific and artistic circles were experimenting across disciplines and media boundaries to create new forms of expression, thus experiencing new interconnections between body and machine, pathos and matter, time and rhythm, construction and projection. Paradigmatic in this context are the Theatre of the Proletkult, Alexei Gastev’s Central Institute of Labour, and Solomon Nikritin’s Projection Theatre.

In the first section, I would like to give a preview of the expressive practices, which will guide us to my second point. Taking the work of Sergei Eisenstein as my example – his stage drama *Gas Masks* and the film *Strike* – I would like to sketch the complex association between the operational topology of the factory and the structural force of cinematic thinking. In these artistic strategies, I am interested in a dialectic method which, in the dynamic processes of montage, rhythm and movement always reveals its opposite sides – the intervals, material resistances and sensuous strike forces. They become decisive when they give rise to new body images and thus contribute to the intensification of filmic expression. Finally, I would like to interpret these visual intensifications as an aesthetic manifestation or even a *gesture of the political*.

At the Central Institute of Labour, the translation of ephemeral body movements into visible, audible and replicable media arrangements was at the focus of biomechanical movement studies. Also known as the *Institute for the Scientific ...
Organization of Work and the Mechanization of Man, the CIT was founded by the poet and revolutionary Alexei Gastev in Moscow in 1920. Supported by Lenin, Gastev projected in 1928 the Ustanovka (‘Setup’) joint-stock company to audit the work of industrial enterprises and provide recommendations on efficient organization of their work processes. It provided CIT with a commercial basis and led to its financial independence from the state. By 1938, shortly before Gastev was arrested and executed, the CIT had produced over 500,000 qualified workers in 200 trades, and 20,000 industrial trainers in 1,700 educational centres.

The experimental training work and the elaboration of educational methods were realized in different ‘laboratories’. Andrey Smirnov and Lubov Pchelkina give a precise description of these intermedial dispositifs and techniques:

Alongside the physiological laboratory, there were the labs for ‘sensorics’, ‘psychotechnics’ and education. A variety of ‘multimedia’ tools and ‘interactive’ gadgets were devised, including instruments for photography and film, systems for monitoring musical performances and instructorless simulation apparatus for cars and planes.

However, the activities of the CIT went beyond the pragmatic biomechanical ‘mechanization of men’. In one of Gastev’s exhibitions of the 1920s entitled ‘Art of Movement’, accompanying performances of Solomon Nikritin’s Projection Theatre, stereo images traced the physical trajectories of tools, hammers, weapons, the physical joints of workers, pianists and sportsmen, tracking and monitoring the three-dimensional characteristics of motion.

In his main theoretical text, in practice a textbook on biomechanical generation, Kak nado rabotat’ (‘How people work’), Gastev urged the decentralization of labour administration, which was to be carried out in the future by worker and machine. What is interesting here is the primacy of the expressivity of the work gesture. At first sight it appears to be diametrically opposed to the imperative of a mechanical optimization of the


Nikolai Bernstein and Nikolai Tikhonov during an experiment on cyclography. TCA, in: Smirnov, Sound in Z, 114
movements involved in work. Gastev speaks of an 'organic engineering passion', of 'infecting the masses with restless passion, with the work of energy', of 'coefficients of stimulation', and of 'working atmosphere' etc. This expressive-emphatic primacy within work routines is methodically realized in the *projecting* of work rhythms. This paradigm allows clear representation of how the organization and conditioning of movement not only implies the transfer of new embodied knowledge, but also continually creates new forms of expression, new *body images*.

Dziga Vertov’s first sound film, *Enthusiasm: Symphony of the Donbass* (1931), contains a unique documentation of Gastev’s training units. Footage from coalmines is inserted into this *biomechanical ballet*, with the coalface workers performing gymnastic exercises. These are carried out slowly, rhythmically and synchronously, recalling the biomechanical theatre training sessions of Meyerhold or Nikritin. Concerning the representation of these work rhythms, Pudovkin wrote in a commentary on Vertov’s film:

> All his [Vertov's] work was aimed at exploring the rhythmic nature of montage. [...] For his trials of different rhythmic arrangements of film sequences, he needed material that he could cut as he liked. [...] Mainly it was footage of identical repeated processes: the work of human beings, the work of machines, the movement of the masses etc. [...] Machines provided, because of their regular periodic movement, the ideal material for rhythmic montage. It is, therefore, totally absurd to regard Vertov as a documentary filmmaker.

In this balancing act between monotony, precision, and the repetition of work gestures on the one hand, and their rhythmic sound-experimental montage on the other, there was a tension from which new forms of expression emerged. My hypothesis is that these expressive modifications and inventions imply a political dimension in the aesthetic sphere. For it goes hand in hand with a new division and fragmentation of materiality (its disjunction and interconnection with sound), which lends the body a new visibility in a visual-filmic economy.

In February 1924, Sergei Eisenstein, then a director at the Proletkult working
theatre, performed the play ‘Gas Masks’ on the premises of a Moscow gasworks. The author of this ‘melodrama in three acts’, Sergei Tretyakov, determined the venue as follows: ‘The interior of a gasworks. Machines, workbenches, trapdoor to the gas main, an office to the side: table, electric bell, telephone.’ The scenic construction consisted of gigantic real machines and a wooden frame as used in theatres. The play was performed in front of an audience of the gasworks’ employees. The actors wore neither make-up nor costumes, but were dressed in their everyday clothes, and thus blended in with the audience of workers. Eisenstein later wrote that he discovered in these possibilities of materiality, ‘a new kind of effective stimulus, for the gasworks itself, and everything that went along with it, was an organic attraction of the montage of stimuli. The actors were interpreted as physical models (naturzhiki) and not in the sense of an artistic image (obras).’ After the play, the workers from the audience were supposed to climb on to the ‘stage’ and continue their work on the machines and workbenches. But the production, according to Eisenstein, lost much of its force as a result of the contrast between workers and actors, between theatrical scaffolding and actual machines. The plastic charm of factory reality was so strong that the line of the actual material of reality burst into flames with new ardour. It drew everyone under its spell.... and had to break the bounds of that art where it could not exploit its potential to the full.

And so Eisenstein describes the transition to cinema, where, in his first film Strike, he uses the factory as a topos in the filmic sense. In other words, it is not deployed in its entirety as an attraction, as was the case in Gas Masks; nor do the monotony and the rhythmic montage of the work gestures in Strike constitute the expressive character of the material as in Vertov’s film Enthusiasm. Through the striking workers, the factory itself becomes expressive: through new linkages between bodies and machines, through a change in function of factory attributes, tools and other work-related objects. Over and beyond the narrative line of the workers’ strike itself, the factory is, in a visual-filmic manner, taken apart, fragmented, and put together again to great effect.

As a first allusion – a kind of visual harbinger of imminent events – we see the lyrical
flight of the revolutionary flysheets, which covers the
dark framework of the machines. The next scene relates
the tragic occasion of the strike: an innocent worker is
accused of theft by the factory management, and hangs
himself on a machine. This symptomatic event, in which
the factory framework is functionally transformed into
gallows, is not only the tragic turning point – the
peripeteia – of the narrative, but also determines,
according to my hypothesis, the aesthetic vector of the
film, which consists in the fundamental misappropriation and functional
transformation of the factory elements.

Grief at the death of the workmate tips over into rage: workers leaving the factory.
But Eisenstein is not content with a mere sequence at the factory gate, though he
does however add one as homage to the Lumière brothers at the end of the scene.
Like a strategic instruction to act, movements are demonstrated in which workers
leave their workplaces, throw their tools in a heap and free their hands for the fight.
Machines take over the function of rostrums from where the comrades are urged to
strike. From here, various perspectives, long shots and close-ups of the storming
masses of striking workers are taken.

In the following scene, featuring a punch-up with
a strike-breaker, impressions of the bodies of the
brawling men are conveyed from various angles:
Eisenstein deliberately avoids repeating the sequences in
order to destroy the physical unity of the fight scene and
recreate it in filmic dynamic. This dynamic comes close to
the collages and photomontages of Georg Grosz and
John Hartfield, which Eisenstein adduces in *The Montage
of Attractions*.

In this punch-up scene, work items – wooden planks, carts, water and cement – are
totally divorced from their ordinary factory functions and used as weapons. For the
duration of *Strike*, the factory is represented beyond any functionality: the workers’
body movements and gestures are all the more expressive the less they have to do
with their everyday work. These are not work gestures, but gestures of attraction
and repulsion, of destruction and demolition.

The fight in the midst of all the factory equipment evokes on the one hand a whole series of filmic associations: American silent film comedies, and burlesques by Charles Bowers or Charlie Chaplin. The expressive aesthetic of these bodies, their acrobatics and athletic feats, is closer to the contemporary ‘theatre of attractions’ and biomechanics. Meyerhold, Nikritin and Forgger deployed Constructivist machinery and mobile pieces of equipment as fragments of reality, the equipment often being borrowed from real factories. Stage props often served the purpose of an analytical segmentation of movement, which in turn led to the scenic conditionality and defamiliarization of everyday gestures.

The basic element of Meyerhold’s scenic biomechanics was the analytic segmentation of movement in training units. These exercises, known as ‘études’, were either demonstrated individually or put together to form mini-complexes.

1. The arch
2. Jump on to the back and shift in weight
3. Fall; catching and throwing a weight
4. Hitting the nose
5. Boxed ear
6. Kicking a knees-bent figure
7. Playing with a staff (juggling)
8. Throwing a ball high
9. Throwing a stone
10. Jumping on to opponent’s chest
11. Playing with short dagger
12. Quadrille
13. The string
14. The horse
15. Four skaters
16. Tripping and falling
17. The bridge
18. Sawing

Two staged examples, the ‘Boxed ear’ and ‘Jumping on to opponent’s chest’, Jörg Böchow, Das Theater Meyerholds und die Biomechanik.
Each of these exercises was composed of a series of movements and analysed into three segments, which revealed the biomechanical movement skeleton as a relationship of forces. These three conceptual basic segments were:

1. Otkas: preparatory counter-movement
2. Posyl: sending off or implementation
3. Stoika: standing still or fixing

Eisenstein, who in the early twenties worked and taught at Meyerhold’s theatre, focuses his 1934 article ‘Movement and Counter-movement’ on the first basic element, the otkas as a dialectic principle of this movement triad: ‘The movement which one makes, in order to carry out a movement in a particular direction, in preparation for the movement in the opposite direction (partly or completely) is known in the practice of stage movement as ‘otkas movement’.

In Russian, ‘otkas’ means denial or refusal. However, if we look more closely at this movement practice, it does not consist in the refusal of movement as such, but rather in a contrast-element or conflict, which merely serves to realize the movement all the more precisely and effectively. Eisenstein therefore describes the construction of the otkas as “a necessary condition for an expressive solution”. For it is precisely in this ‘contrast element’ that he discovers not only the pragmatic effectiveness of a movement, but “one of the strongest means to capture attention.” It is therefore an aesthetic element which can provoke an effect, and thus also an affect, in the spectator. Otkas, writes Eisenstein, is “a ‘self contrast’ in the action as performed”, it is a “technical support and condition of expressive strength, which itself does not possess any performative value on its own account.”
We can analyse these biomechanical principles in images of the fighting bodies in *Strike*, their movement is broken down into its elementary components. Pushing upwards, downwards and circular movements conjure up the biomechanical studies of Meyerhold. The bodies too are fragmented: close-up shots which show the action of a hand, the laughing or speaking of a mouth, running legs, or legs no longer capable of providing locomotion...

The dissection and filmic re-montage of individual bodily movements goes hand in hand with the representation of a *political body*: the striking factory as a whole is caught up in a *counter-movement*, an *otkas*. The bodies, which are in ordinary circumstances exploited in monotonous work and alienated from the products of this work, become *expressive* by the aesthetic means of fragmentation and filmic re-montage. Eisenstein *defamiliarizes* this capitalist exploitation by revealing the factory precisely in its non-functionality, removing the tools from their normal function and deploying them for the liberation struggle. In the process, the individual workers do not by any means lose their identities in some homogeneous ornament, neither are their bodies displayed as a collective unit. Instead, Eisenstein chooses the mode of attraction of that *method of couplings* which brings associatively single pictures and ideas effectively into mutual conflict.

In *Peuples exposés, peuples figurants*, Georges Didi-Huberman asks about the immanent political value of aesthetic representations. He is referring to film extras who appear not as living shadows, but aesthetically as ‘*acteurs dans l’histoire*’. In Eisenstein’s *Strike*, Didi-Huberman analyses the aesthetic strategies that give ‘the mass its force’ once more, and its potential for action: it becomes the ‘lead role in the history’ that Eisenstein makes aesthetically visible by exposing the specificity of its gestures and voices.  

In his 1921 Essay ‘Critique of Violence’, Walter Benjamin analyses the philosophical foundations of a political general strike and its violence-prerogative: the procedural method of the proletarian general strike is the unconditional abolishment of state power. It involves political justice, which becomes in the political sphere the *gesture of the political* itself. Like language, for Benjamin the strike in its pure and...
revolutionary violence as pure means would be non-violent. Neither instrument of institutional power nor the anticipation of transformed power relations, but, in its mere mediacy, the overthrow itself: "an overthrow that this kind of strike not so much causes as accomplishes." According to Benjamin, the strike is not merely just form of politics among many, but is the actual manifestation of the political, which finds its expression in the political strength of the proletariat.

The conceptual link between Eisenstein’s film work and Benjamin’s ‘Critique of Violence’ is most clearly in evidence in a passage from the ‘Elective Affinities’ essay devoted to the category of expressionlessness (das Ausdruckslose). Like the strike, expressionlessness appears as ‘interruption’, ‘objection’, and fragmentation of totality:

Expressionlessness is that critical violence which, while it is unable to separate appearance from essence in art, does not allow them to blend. In expressionlessness the sublime violence of truth appears as the one which determines the language of the real world according to the laws of the moral world. It destroys [zerschlägt] whatever survives in all its beautiful appearance as the legacy of chaos: false, erring totality – the absolute. Only this completes the work, by breaking it down, shattering [zerschlägt] it, making it into a fragment of the true world, a torso of a symbol.

Ausdruckslosigkeit is a concept of expression which is for Benjamin constituted as an atkas: refusal of totality by means of fragmentation, a denial of synthesis or potency of expression in a common sense. I am thinking for example of the silent cry of Mother Courage in Brecht’s play or the caesura in Hölderlin’s poetry, which Benjamin gives as an example of interruption in his essay.

The fragmentation of matter as an aesthetic strategy is seen by Benjamin as analogous to the events of formation, driven by formlessness, “to which all forms and all performative acts remain exposed” namely, “in so far as these events ‘strike’ the cognition directed toward them with powerlessness.” The fragmented bodies, the non-functional factory and their repurposed objects take on, in Eisenstein’s Strike, that simultaneously destructive and conserving gesture which Benjamin ascribes to the expressionless.

Beyond their differences in (singular and even contrasting) aesthetic strategies we
can ascribe a common expressive character to Vertov’s, Gastev’s and Eisenstein’s inventions of new body images: this consists in a desire to prepare a new ethos of work and a new form of society within and through the means of their aesthetic practices.

To conclude, I can only point to the structural parallel between the early aesthetic of Eisenstein’s and his later concepts of the ‘inner monologue’ and ‘sensuous thinking’. In his unrealized project Capital, Eisenstein planned to film Marx’s political theory using Joyce’s stream of consciousness methods. The fragmentary character of this thinking out loud provided the foundation for the possibility of a meeting between the conscious and the unconscious, the real and the fictitious, between past and future forms of language. The stream of consciousness was the medium in which Eisenstein sought to give political expression to the singular consciousness as an actor on the historical stage. In a final, far-reaching consideration, this last project by Eisenstein transfigures the factory strike into the structure of cinematographic thinking where the neuro-sensorial stimuli constantly strike the logic of everyday consciousness in a non-personal, polyphonic and intimate monologue.

Footnotes

1 For this and further material on biomechanical movement research at CIT and the Theater of Projectionism I am deeply grateful to Lubov Pchelkina and Andrey Smirnov. Andrey Smirnov, Sound in Z. Experiments in Sound and Electronic Music in Early 20th Century Russia (London: Sound and Music, 2013).

2 Andrey Smirnov, Sound in Z, 99.

3 Ibidem.


5 The decentralization would lead to a dual rhythm: “the physiological cardiac rhythm” and the collective rhythm of the “work fever,” to which Gastev devotes particular attention. In the context of the biomechanical relationship between man and machine, Gastev, in his article How people work, sweeps away the prejudices of a technocratically oriented ideology: “The banal notion is widespread that tools will
soon be replaced by machines.” (By ‘tools’, he also meant the body’s limbs.) It is a bourgeois misunderstanding. For all the tools, all the processing machines are nothing other than an intuition of the human organism. If the machine were to triumph one day, research into the elementary mechanics of the human body will be even more urgent, and it will be pursued even more attentively.” Alexei Gastev, *Kak nado rabotat’* (How One Should Work), (Moscow: Ekonomika, 1972), accessed April 1, 2014, http://ruslit.traumlibrary.net/book/gastev-kak-nado-rabotat/gastev-kak-nado-rabotat.html.

6 Alexej Gastev, *Kak nado rabotat’*.


9 Sergei Eisenstein, “МЕЙЕР – АКТЕР... Я – ИНЖЕНЕР...” (Meyer[hold] is an actor... I am an engineer...) in: V. Zabrodin (ed.), *Eisenstein about Meyerhold* (Moscow: Novoye izdatel’stvo, 2005), 158.


11 Jörg Böchow, *Das Theater Meyerholds und die Biomechanik* (Berlin: Alexander Verlag, 1997).


13 Ibidem.

14 Ibidem.

15 Ibidem.


19 Werner Hamacher ascribes the ‘event of forming itself formless’ to the category of ‘afformance’ which is an opposite to the use of ‘performance’ or ‘performative act’ but a kind of ‘ellipsis which silently accompanies any act and which may silently interrupt any speech act’. Werner Hamacher, “Afformative, Strike: Benjamin’s ‘Critique of Violence’”, in: Benjamin and Osborne (eds.), Walter Benjamin’s Philosophy, 110-139, here 128.

20 Ibidem, 126.