

Music in the Poetics of the Films Directed by S.M. Eisenstein

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ABSTRACT

The article discusses the semantic function of music in the poetics of the films directed by S.M. Eisenstein. Not only did S. Eisenstein implement the musical component of films in practice, but he also conceptualized it in numerous theoretical works. This combination of theory and practice has become the basis for the scientific observations and conclusions of the author in the present article. The article focuses on the following issues within the system of the artistic means of S. Eisenstein's films: the issues of musical terminology, the technique of the orchestral counterpoint of visual and auditory images, the correspondence of the genres of music and content types in film sequences.

Keywords: S.M. Eisenstein, music, screenplay, film editing techniques, counterpoint, Strike, Battleship Potemkin

I. INTRODUCTION

Despite the charisma and hypnotism of S.M. Eisenstein, the outstanding Russian film director, his fortune did not always favor him. His victories were followed by defeats and his success gave way to considerable disappointment.

Sergei Eisenstein wrote in one of his articles, "I had an inner compulsion for the mystery of art; art was my obsession. I was prepared to sacrifice anything for its sake." [1]. In fact, these exact words can be considered as S. Eisenstein's motto.

A wide range of tasks performed by S. Eisenstein was always determined by his central focus on the achievement of highly artistic results. The impressive artistic integrity, depth and spirituality of his films grounded on the synthesis of numerous components. In fact, it was S. Eisenstein who always had the final say on the choice of components, which illustrates the etymology of the word "director", which traces back to the Latin *regere* – "to manage, direct, correct" (from Proto—Indo—European root **reg* – "move straight").

II. METHODS OF RESEARCH

The role of music in the poetics of S. Eisenstein's films cannot be defined in one article. The current study does not claim to be exhaustive, and the author is primarily aimed at sharing some accumulated observations on the research subject.

There are at least two ways to address the task of defining the role of music in the poetics of S.

Eisenstein's films. The first way is to understand how the director himself indicated the importance of the musical component; the second one is to carry out the analytical research on the musical material of individual films. Combining both of these ways, we base our observations, to a large extent, on the director's vision of the role and significance of music in filmmaking. It is essential to take into account the fact that by the word "music" S. Eisenstein meant not only music as an art form but also music as a phenomenon of being, that is, the manifestation of the music principle in different spheres of human activity. S. Eisenstein recognized the central role of the music phenomenon in filmmaking yet at the early period of his career — at the stage of silent cinema. According to him, "silent cinema created music for itself. The musicality of actions in silent films was provided by structuring and editing. Strips of films created film action, as well as its music. Just as the emotional faces of silent actors produced the effect of "speaking", the action on the screen produced music". [2]

When working on his last two films, S. Eisenstein collaborated with the outstanding Russian composer S. S. Prokofiev. Their communication (letters and dialogues) is relevant in the context of the research problem, but the relationship between S. Eisenstein and S. Prokofiev is beyond the scope of this article. Thus, we shall get an insight into the creative laboratory of the Master, who quite often — voluntarily or involuntarily — revealed the secrets of his work in verbal texts, thereby giving an opportunity for us to approach solving the research problem.

III. "MUSIC" OF SILENT FILMS

When referring to the creative legacy of S. Eisenstein, particularly the screenplays of his silent films (e.g. "Strike", created in collaboration with G. Aleksandrov, involving V. Pletnev and I. Kravchukovsky), we do not find any comments or remarks on the music itself. Such comments only appear in sound films. For the first time, a separate section titled "Sound" (not even "music") is found in the screenplay of "Bezhin Meadow" (1935–1937), which was created in cooperation with I. Babel. What was behind the comments? Beside the musical soundtrack itself, "Sound" also implied the narrative aspect of the storyline: dialogues and monologues of the characters, exclamations, background noises, etc. Actually, the background music was presented from a rather general point of view: music of the night, music of alarm, music of the dawn, singing the song in the distance, funeral march, and victory march.

S. Eisenstein's first films were silent: "Glumov's Diary", "Strike", "Battleship Potemkin". For the latter two, music was created later, after film premiere.

The premiere of the first sound full-length film "The Jazz Singer" on October 6, 1927 at the Warner Theater in New York ended the silent film era. Sound cinema technologies soon spread around America and Europe and seemed to be an epoch-making breakthrough. Nevertheless, having acknowledged this landmark event, S. Eisenstein and his colleagues – G. Alexandrov and V. Pudovkin, voiced their concerns about it in the article "The Future of Sound Films" published not only in the Soviet Union but also in Europe (Germany and England).

Their concerns regarded the dangers of cinema losing its importance as a self-sufficient and independent form of art. From the point of view of S. Eisenstein, this could be counterbalanced by the development of editing techniques in filmmaking. He was strongly convinced that filmmaking is editing before anything else, and that "the first experiments with sound should focus on sound and visual image disagreement." [3]

IV. EDITING TECHNIQUE: ON THE ISSUE OF MUSICAL TERMINOLOGY

A number of S. Eisenstein's most significant works are devoted to film editing techniques. Editing, however, is impossible without a screenplay, which was the basis and impulse for Eisenstein's story drama. Legend has it that S. Eisenstein did not direct films according to screenplays but improvised. Apparently, this legend lived on due to a number of famous Eisenstein's sayings, for instance, "A screenplay is only a transcript of the emotional impulse"; "A screenplay is a shoetree that keeps the shape of a shoe, until it is put

on a foot"; "A screenplay is a bottle to be cracked open in order to pour the temperament of wine into the wide—open mouths of the perceivers" [4]. It can be said that certain episodes, plot and editing devices of screenplays were "musicalized". In the above-mentioned article of 1928, "The Future of Sound Films", [5] S. Eisenstein put forward the idea of "the counterpoint use of sound in relation to the visual strip of film", which, as he believed, would ultimately lead to "the creation of a new orchestral counterpoint of visual and sound images" [6], i.e. to the idea of the synthesis of spatial and temporal arts. The so-called orchestral counterpoint should be highlighted in this quote, as it is directly related to music. Meanwhile, it should be noted that S. Eisenstein's theory of montage includes such music concepts as time (metric montage), rhythm (rhythmic montage), mode (tonal montage), and overtone (overtone montage); another concept is intellectual montage, which, however, is not a music definition. In general, this music terminology became a natural component of Eisenstein's theoretical works. The use of music definitions is by no means a formality, as their essence was directly conveyed.

V. THE TECHNIQUE OF ORCHESTRAL COUNTERPOINT OF VISUAL AND AUDITORY IMAGES

As the director himself believed, his idea of creating an orchestral counterpoint of visual and sound images was fully implemented in the Japanese Kabuki theatre. Eisenstein saw this theatre as a model for the filmmaking of the future.

In his article "A Sudden Cut", S. Eisenstein wrote that the Japanese unconsciously, appealing to the senses, "focus on the final amount of brain stimulation...Instead of accompaniment, Kabuki vividly demonstrates the switching technique: switching from one material to another, from one category of "stimuli" to another" [7].

In this respect, from S. Eisenstein's perspective, the art of the Kabuki theatre was approaching synaesthesia, since in such a theatre "we indeed "hear" the movement and "see" the sound." [8] Thus, in the Kabuki theatre, Eisenstein's main idea was put into action, according to which sound and image should not exist separately, but be interdependent elements forming something more than just the sum of the parts. Eisenstein described this phenomenon as early as 1923, equalizing the elements of different categories. Thus, theoretically, the main unit of the theatre was established, which was called "attraction".

Providing the landscape with a special ability to convey different emotional states, S. Eisenstein stated that "only music is fully available to do it with its vaguely perceptible picturesqueness". [9] The poetics of

the films directed by Eisenstein is characterized by this precise kind of emotional landscape that performs a musical function, which the director called the "nonindifferent nature".

The musicality of the landscape is achieved due to the emotional effect provided "not only by selecting imaginary elements of nature, but primarily by the musical development and composition of what is depicted" [10]. Such a method of work was established at the stage of silent cinema and had an important role in the development of cinema in general, following the single tradition at all stages — "from silent films through sound films to sound—visual filmmaking" [11].

Thus, not only the audible (music) but also the visible (landscape) produces sound in the poetics of S. Eisenstein's films. Moreover, both the visual and the musical arts have common dramatic and composition features.

The landscape in S. Eisenstein's films performs not so much a pictorial but a filmmaking function. In the film "Battleship Potemkin", as the director described it, "before the culminating scene "Crying over the corpse of Vakulenchuk" the famous "fogs" were added. A series of slow motion shots of heavy fog over the water and the black silhouettes of ships evoked the feeling of silence and anxiety, whereas in the shots of the sun's rays breaking through the fog — the feeling of anticipation and hope" [12].

In almost all of S. Eisenstein's films, the key function that landscape performs is the music one, conveying a certain emotional meaning. Some examples of such landscapes include the night landscape of Petrograd in "October" and Russian landscape in the four seasons in "Old and New" [13].

VI. SEMANTIC NATURE OF THE GENRE OF MUSIC IN THE POETICS OF EISENSTEIN'S FILMS

In the poetics of S. Eisenstein's films some content types were formed, which possess the features of certain genres of music. This overlap with the musical component can be found in the genre of both films and individual scenes. Thus, for instance, the final scene of "Strike" ("You fell victim") can be compared to a "Requiem". Its final shot depicting many people killed, lying in different positions certainly produces a catharsis.

L. Arnshtam, the film director, in one of his articles described how much he was impressed by the similarity between the structure of the final scene of "Battleship Potemkin" and Chaconne by J.S. Bach.

About the composition of the film "Alexander Nevsky" S. Eisenstein wrote: "We deal with a fugue (c'est le plus «fougueux» des films de l'auteur) [14].

Aware of a number of different defects in the film (avant tout property, lengthening, rhythmic shifts, etc.), the director explained its success by "shamanism", since in the film one and the same idea is repeated, like beating a shaman's drum. Not a single remark, episode or scene without the enemy and the need to beat them. Such an idea expressed in all the diversity of everything that happens (and even overabundance) and presented so explicitly cannot be found elsewhere. It hypnotizes. [15] This ubiquitous thought woven into the film, can be equalized to the subject of a fugue, which leaves the musical form only for interludes.

The music of S. Eisenstein's films had an important role for the implementation of certain ideological principles. For example, in 1926, at the premiere of "Battleship Potemkin" in Europe, the song "You Fell Victim" was played from the phonograph record that Eisenstein had brought from Odessa. The director's aim was to recreate the exact mood that prevailed when shooting the film. As it is known, S. Eisenstein stated objectives at the initial stage of working on the film, while the strategies for their achievement were different, often expressed in the metaphorical form. Despite the similarity of the objectives, S. Eisenstein called "Strike" a treatise, and "Battleship Potemkin" — a hymn [16]. Thus, the hymn, having such a deep semantic meaning in musical art, acquired the conceptual nature within the poetics of this film.

Working on the film "Que viva Mexico!", which he did not finish, S. Eisenstein wrote: "Our aim in the production of the film that we are currently working on is to create an artistic portrait of the contrasting beauty of landscapes, clothes, art and people of Mexico and depict people in their relationship with the natural environment and social evolution; to combine mountains, seas, deserts, ruins of ancient civilizations and people of the past and present **in a symphonic sketch, symphonic in terms of its structure and composition** (emphasis added), which is to a certain extent similar to Diego Rivera's frescoes in the National Palace." [17] S. Eisenstein's statement on the similarity between the film and a symphonic sketch reveals the universal constructive principles that are intensified both in a musical composition and in the forms of human existence. It should be highlighted that S. Eisenstein outlines the similarity of the film not only to a symphonic sketch, but also to the genre of symphony, calling it a "multicolored symphony film about Mexico", the background of which is shaped by six magnificent Mexican folk songs. Meanwhile, this is of critical importance, since the symphony is one of the conceptual genres of music with its pronounced specific features based on the laws of dialectic.

In the article "Nonindifferent nature" the director conceptualized the compositional principles of the film from the perspective of the laws of musical art, first and

foremost, the universal laws of rhythm. According to Aristotle, all arts, including music, ground on mimesis, or imitation. Music, from his point of view is based on imitating the rhythm of life. In general, rhythm is the fundamental and, what is more, the universal basis of any temporal and spatial arts.

Asking himself the following question, "Why, in fact, is music absolutely essential? Why is music considered as the normal state of things, something a priori necessary in the film?" S. Eisenstein found an obvious answer. He was convinced that the point is not as much the emotional effect, but the fact that music is able to "emotionally express what cannot be expressed by any other means" [18]. The importance of musical drama in film editing was obvious to S. Eisenstein, who gave the following recommendations to his future colleagues: "When editing, you should put together the strips of a film and combine them until they produce the desired effect, because just giving an account of events of the plot through editing the sequence of individual strips has nothing to do with art. And when the combination of the strips of a film starts following **the principles of musical structure** (emphasis added), then it becomes what it should be" [19].

The music in "Alexander Nevsky" and "Ivan the Terrible", the last two films directed by S. Eisenstein, which was composed by S. S. Prokofiev is of considerable interest to us, too, but it is beyond the scope of the present article and should be studied separately.

VII. CONCLUSION

The artistic discoveries of S. Eisenstein, the outstanding film director, who fully implemented the idea of the synthesis of arts in filmmaking, were recognized yet while he was alive. This can be confirmed by a quote from the Sunday Times newspaper dated September 1, 1946: "I will not discuss Eisenstein's theories about the correspondences of the eye movement along the image contour and the movement of the melody. I will only emphasize the exceptional effect of counterpoint orchestration on sight and hearing, resulting from the combination of Prokofiev's music and the flow of visual images" [Translated from Russian].

The entire "Ivan the Terrible" film provides the effect of full integration: actions, gestures, background, sound, words, musical harmony, icons and magnificent scenery make up the organic whole with the sound. The fact that this film produces such a lasting impression testifies to the low compositional quality of the films we watch a present. It also proves that S. Eisenstein is among the very few directors, who understood a film as integral work of art, not a sound film with music effects" [20].

The conceptual clarity of the remarkable S. Eisenstein's films resulted in consistent expression means; and in this synthesis of arts, in the exuberance of the "invigorating form" (S.I. Freilikh), music took its rightful place [21].

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