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# Re-editing as Psychotechnique: Montage and Mediality in Early Soviet Cinema

*Malte Hagener*

According to traditional historiography, Soviet cinema comes into existence in the mid-1920s when the triumvirate of Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin, and Alexander Dovshenko suddenly and seemingly out of nowhere bursts onto the scene. Classical film histories might offer a few lines on Tsarist cinema, but they contain little, if anything at all, on the years 1919 to 1924 because – as would be the standard argument propagated by Henri Langlois – the chaotic situation following the revolution, the lack of resources and the general turmoil, did not allow for any systematic film production. In effect, there was hardly a film production to speak of, therefore there was no need to write about the period. In the past 20 years, this has changed markedly, especially in the wake of the 1989 Pordenone retrospective “Silent Witnesses” and its 1996 sequel “In the Land of the Soviets, 1918-1924.”<sup>1</sup> Another decisive shift has been the recent “discovery” of the early films of Dziga Vertov, who was virtually unknown in the West<sup>2</sup> until his extended tour promoting *THE MAN WITH THE MOVIE CAMERA* (*CELOVEK S KINOAPPARATOM*) in 1929.<sup>3</sup> Vertov already complicates the canonical story of Soviet cinema because his materialist practice offers a different kind of cinema from the narratively driven, rhetorically laden revolutionary films of the 1925-1930 period.<sup>4</sup>

Yet again, it would be misleading to play off Vertov against Eisenstein (or other filmmakers from this period) because their theory and practice, albeit in different ways, did put the materiality and mediality of film at center stage. If considered in this perspective, Eisenstein’s voluminous thinking can be summarized as a series of ideas on psychotechnics and biomechanics related to how film technology and mental activity intersect: the attraction (the collision of two shots) acts as a stimulus on the psyche triggering specific responses, thus intellectual montage can be seen as an external simulation and visualization of thinking and imagistic discourse, while pathos and ecstasy function as a transport into a pure state of sensation and feeling. Lev Kuleshov was interested in how the coupling of shots was forged into an imaginary spatial and temporal unity by the spectator, while

Vertov championed the interval as the force prying open the imaginary space between shots. All reactions of the spectators resulted from the careful crafting of filmic material, the selection and arrangement of shots, which could be, at least this was the hope at the time, measured, planned, and triggered. In this sense, the Soviet cinema of the 1920s was not – as is often claimed – primarily interested in rhetorical devices and storytelling techniques in the service of politics, but rather in the capabilities and opportunities that the medium could offer. I want to focus on one specific example here – the re-montage of existing material – because it shows how a specific historical situation gave rise to specific techniques and a specific employment of the medium’s possibilities. Implicit in this discussion is an attempt to rethink the nexus of style and technology as a complex negotiation in which neither side dominates the other, thus avoiding any kind of determinism.

## The Practice of Re-Montage

What characterized the Soviet cinema in its first years of existence was dearth – the lack of material and resources after the war and revolution had two immediate consequences: on the one hand it resulted in a scarcity of (feature) film production, while on the other hand, paradoxically, it led to an extraordinary outburst of creativity. In the first years after the revolution, the young Soviet Union produced very few feature films, but concentrated instead on two forms of filmmaking, treated marginally in most film histories: re-montage and non-fiction. Two of the most famous filmmakers who took up film immediately after the revolution (and before the triumvirate Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Dovshenko rose to prominence) could be seen as embodiments of these two larger trends: Lev Kuleshov, known for his montage experiments, most famously the formulation of the proverbial “Kuleshov effect”; and Dziga Vertov, known for the category-bursting non-fiction production of the early years of Soviet cinema. Without wanting to personify these larger trends and while trying to undermine the overriding *auteur* theory still prevalent in film history, the oeuvre of these two celebrated directors can be productively mapped onto a genealogy of re-editing and non-fiction. I will deal here with the re-editing of existing films while non-fiction would require a different kind of reflection.<sup>5</sup>

In the early 1920s, most films exhibited in the Soviet Union were foreign productions, mostly German and American, or films that originated in the Tsarist period. Yet, these films were often shown in altered versions since the film committee already had, in early 1919, founded a section for the re-montage of foreign films (and of films produced before the revolution), a practice dating back to 1918 and that remained common during the whole existence of the Soviet Union.<sup>6</sup> A good many filmmakers sharpened their eyes and scissors while practicing these transformations, among them Lev Kuleshov, Sergei Eisenstein, and

Esfir Shub. The practice of re-montage consisted first of all of the cutting and removal of excessively violent or overtly sexual scenes. Obviously, this common way of censorship was not specific to the Soviet situation alone. More importantly though, far-reaching changes were made when films were converted ideologically: whole sequences were pieced together in different ways, titles were changed, and shots were removed to give a film a different political thrust. A classic example of this “bolshevikation” of Western films is the transformation of *DR. MABUSE, DER SPIELER* (Fritz Lang, 1921/1922) into *GILDED PUTREFACTION* (Eisenstein/Shub, 1924).<sup>7</sup> Apparently, Eisenstein took time off from the editing on his debut *STRIKE* (*STACHKA*, 1925) in order to work on Lang’s film, which demonstrates that this was not just an assignment done grudgingly, but an integral part of developing a different way of making films. There was a special value involved in working with existing material (instead of shooting one’s own); there was something to be learned from the rearrangement of shots and the modularity of film. The Soviet montage school is unthinkable without this practice of creating new meaning by cutting, repositioning, or exchanging shots.

The technique was widespread, as practically all foreign films were re-edited. As Yuri Tsivian reports, these specialists and cinephiles *avant la lettre* developed an extraordinary pride and confidence in their work:

They were connoisseurs: no one in the film industry (or outside it) knew Western cinema better than the re-editors; they were experts: few filmmakers compared to them in mastering the technique of editing [...]; they were arrogant: they believed they could improve Griffith! And despite being badgered by film critics, they were proud of their profession!<sup>8</sup>

The reversal of hierarchies so typical of the Soviet culture in the 1920s related to the theory of re-montage on a number of levels. One can point out, for instance, the inversion of the traditional evaluation of the arts, most famously encapsulated in Lenin’s legendary claim for film as “the most important of the arts.” Additionally, the eccentricity and the carnivalesque in FEKS (factory of the eccentric actor);<sup>9</sup> the significance of the circus, highly valued by Eisenstein; the prominent feature of the music hall in work by the Futurists;<sup>10</sup> and the notion of “ostranenie” (making strange) by the Russian formalists,<sup>11</sup> are all indicators of this reversal of hierarchy. Here, the inversion of center and periphery adheres to a practice of breaking down traditional barriers and evaluations, of toppling traditional value judgments, of rearranging existing elements. Undermining and transforming the narrative, making a film state something unintended as in the re-montage is akin to this reversal of established hierarchies.

## From Collage to Montage: Modernism

In retrospect, the Soviet cinema of the 1920s is often subsumed under a single term: montage. It is hard to disagree with this claim, as the collection of heterogeneous fragments, the juxtaposition of different parts, and the sudden clash of diverse pieces indeed became an important and central aspect of the films that came to represent the Soviet production as a whole in the West. While it is important to remember that the 1920s also saw a popular cinema of genre films and an interest in film stars,<sup>12</sup> the focus of this chapter will remain on the more high-brow art aligned with the avant-garde. In fact, montage in a wider sense is not specific to the cinema and it was widespread in avant-garde art practice of the 1920s.<sup>13</sup> The concept itself can be found in various guises across different modernist art forms: from collage in visual arts (Cubism and Surrealism, Hannah Höch), to the integration of everyday material in literature (Tristan Tzara, James Joyce, John Dos Passos, Alfred Döblin), all the way to the usage of existing phrases in sound art (Charles Ives, Walter Ruttmann's *WEEKEND*). In Russia, montage was prefigured in pre-revolutionary art, especially in Futurism and constructivism, and then taken up via theater, as can be seen in Sergei Eisenstein's short film, *GLUMOV'S DIARY* (1923), which was made for a theater production.

This opens up a wide horizon for understanding the practice of re-editing, or re-montage. In formal terms, re-montage was related to collage because the creative act consisted of cutting up, isolating elements, destroying an old context and creating a new one, when re-combining the pre-existing parts in a different whole. Re-montage could also be related to the Dadaesque technique of blowing up an ordered bourgeois universe and creating non-sense (or anti-sense); the title *GILDED PUTREFACTION* could have easily been thought up for a Zürich Dada soirée or for a meeting of the Parisian surrealists. Moreover, an element of abstraction can be found in this strategy as the narrative – which traditionally takes center stage – recedes into the background and fresh meaning is created from existing material in a new assembly. It is on these three levels – collage technique, destroying existing order, and abstraction from a predominance of narrative – that the Soviet cinema aligned itself with avant-garde preoccupations in a more general way. In fact, the practice of reverse engineering (i.e., taking something apart in order to understand its functioning) is typical of a constructivist ethos: isolating elements, examining how energy is generated through a particular sequence by focusing on the contrast and alternation of parts, and putting the elements together again. The modular approach, constructing a whole from a limited number of existing entities, proved to be crucial for montage, as the filmmakers saw themselves as engineers working on the hearts and minds of the people.

This new practice was fundamentally born from the capabilities of the medium, as Jay Leyda in his pioneering study on the compilation of film has argued:

“The basic technical contribution of Kuleshov [...] was the discovery that there were, inherent in a single piece of unedited film two strengths: its own, and the strength of its relation to other pieces of film.”<sup>14</sup> The new practice also called for a different organization of labor which followed a specific model: the collective or the reliance on a small and stable group. One can think here of the FEKS collective, of Eisenstein and his assistants (they called themselves “the iron five”), of Kuleshov’s workshop, of Dziga Vertov’s Cinema-Eye group, of the Proletkult collective and many more.<sup>15</sup> Working in collectives had two direct effects: on the one hand, this was meant to work against the diagnosis of alienation from work that orthodox Marxism saw in Fordist factories, where tasks were divided into minimal units assigned to different workers; on the other hand, producing in small groups of highly skilled specialists is reminiscent of engineering teams in research departments. The Soviets were fascinated by modern industrial production in which labor was divided according to abstract models of flow and efficiency. Similar models were developed by Frederick Taylor, whose ideas influenced Vsevolod Meyerhold’s notion of biomechanics (which in turn can be found in Eisenstein’s thinking). In fact, the Soviet montage cinema arguably occupies the confluence of scientific management and Pavlovian behaviorism, since it can be mapped on the human body and psyche.<sup>16</sup>

In the desire for renewal and restructuring, these examples are not only novel models for organizing labor processes that address the individual as a specific bundle of physiological and psychological reactions, but these activities also gave rise to the study and teaching of the medium. Tellingly and crucially, the collective was not only a work collective compatible with communist society, but it moreover led to a dissemination of knowledge and abilities that were in traditional film cultures (like in Hollywood or Weimar Germany) heavily policed by specialists’ associations. The pedagogical impetus of the avant-garde has traditionally been neglected, yet education is a crucial element in any attempt at restructuring the power relations in the cinema.

## **Practical Research and Theoretical Practice: Studying the Cinema**

The idea of *technē*, prevalent in 1920s Russia, is one in which formal and aesthetic elements cannot be distinguished from technical or practical questions. Therefore, *technē* does not distinguish between art, science, and technology, between theory and practice; instead, it connects skill with reflection. The early experiments of Soviet film were as much practical research as they were theoretical practice. In this sense, the Soviet filmmakers behaved like engineers faced with the daunting task of making a new machine from the recombination of old parts. At the same time, this process was seen as a learning experience which could be reflected upon and appropriated in the next films to be made. Hence, many of the early montage experiments took place in an environment of teaching

and learning – in fact, (professional) filmmaking was not yet separated from teaching and other didactic work. This merging of art and learning can be seen for instance in Meyerhold’s theater experiments which brought Eisenstein to the cinema, in the workshops of Kuleshov and FEKS, or in the work of Georgii and Sergei Vasiliev, later famous filmmakers in their own right remembered mainly for the socialist-realist classic *CHAPAEV* (1934). The Vasilievs put together an educational film from existing material, *THE ABC OF FILM EDITING* (*AZBUKA KINOMONTAZHA*, 1926) that illustrated the practice of re-editing. While the film was used in class at the Film Institute in Moscow, there was also a book published under the same title in 1930. Just like the avant-garde wanted to overcome the barriers separating life and art, Soviet film culture aimed at an approach to the medium that took the basic characteristics of the medium as its starting point.

It is worth dwelling in a bit more detail on the workshop of Kuleshov and the “films without films” which were staged in this context, as this practice illustrates how the medium film could be abstracted from its technical and material basis. This was the preferred method of teaching in the early years of the VGIK, the Russian State University of Cinematography, which had been in existence since 1919, first as an acting school which was successively transformed into the first film school anywhere in the world. The “films without films” were performed on flexible stages with swift scene changes in order to master formal aspects of montage in a different medium. Of course, lack of cameras, film material, and other necessary equipment played a part in the reversion to theater, but implicated in this practice was also an abstraction and generalization which had a didactic effect for learning the principles and processes not in a passive and abstract way, but concretely using a case study. When considering Kuleshov’s workshop it becomes clearer how mastering technique is bound up with an investigation into the basic functioning of a medium:

From 1922 through 1926 [...], the workshop held classes off campus. Class members were permitted to study with Kuleshov alone and were excused from attending courses taught by other teachers. The group’s autonomy encouraged a sense of collective learning and cohesiveness within the class. Individual students with special skills – boxing, acrobatics, set design – led classes within their areas of expertise. Exams and grades were never administered; instead, particular achievements were recognized by tokens ranging from ribbons to flowers, and these were issued on the basis of a student vote. In lieu of reading assignments, the group collectively attended movies at Moscow theaters, studying and discussing the only texts they deemed worthy – film.<sup>17</sup>

In formalist circles, such as the journal *Lef*, the debate on re-editing peaked around 1926 when the Soviet cinema was taking another direction – from large-scale experiments toward narrative-driven films aimed at achieving a specific political effect. Writers at *Lef* took issue with Dziga Vertov for shooting new material, but also for the way he used documentary material, thus destroying it for future use. As Mikhail Yampolski has argued:

Films were born from the film archives as from the earth, in order to return again to them. The eternal document absorbed the transient film. [...] In so far as the material was understood as raw material for permanent re-combination, the film archive became an endless and inexhaustible source for the future film-maker.<sup>18</sup>

Not coincidentally, the mid-1920s was the time when the achievements of the Soviet cinema became first visible to an international audience in films such as Eisenstein's *BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN* (*BRONENOSÉZ POTEMKIN*, 1925), Pudovkin's *MOTHER* (*MATJ*, 1926) or Kuleshov's *BY THE LAW* (*PO ZAKONU*, 1926). One had to discard at least of the more radical part of this (apparently) uncontrollable practice which was nevertheless a necessary step in developing the specific techniques of meaning-making through montage.<sup>19</sup>

Yet again, Soviet filmmakers had no monopoly on this kind of practice. Films created through the practice of montage and re-contextualization of existing footage could be found at the same time in avant-garde circles across Europe: *BALLET MÉCANIQUE* (Dudley Murphy/Fernand Léger, 1923) uses pre-existing footage; *INFLATION* (Hans Richter, 1927) is comprised almost entirely of stock shots; as is the satire *HISTOIRE DU SOLDAT INCONNU* (Henri Storck, 1932).<sup>20</sup> At the same time, similar techniques were also not uncommon in more mainstream circles: under the auspices of the German film studio Ufa, popular compilation films were made by Oskar Kalbus, e.g., on Henny Porten (*HENNY PORTEN. LEBEN UND LAUFBAHN EINER FILMKÜNSTLERIN*, 1928), and Prometheus also heavily re-edited Soviet films for re-distribution in the West.<sup>21</sup> Arguably though, the Soviet experiments were the most radical and the most far-reaching, as they combined psychological and physiological elements with artistic and cultural considerations.

## Conclusion

It is always difficult to establish direct links of cause and effect, but it is hard to deny that the widespread practice of re-editing – corroborated by the lack of material after the revolution – played a crucial part in establishing montage as the key technique of filmmaking. It could be argued that these experiments gave many of the filmmakers that rose to prominence in the 1920s the chance to de-



velop skills and techniques that they would later integrate into more standardized and predictable forms in the service of the revolutionary cause. The question that was implicitly asked in the different experiments was whether meaning was inherent in a shot or whether it was the sequence in which it was edited that fixed its meaning in a certain way. Therefore, the nexus between the collision of shots as experienced in the spectator's psyche and mind was seen as the gravitational core of filmmaking, rather than the indexical nature of the image or the phenomenon of images in movement.

The 1920s in the Soviet Union saw a broad reception, discussion, and application of psychological theories in politics and economy, but also in the arts and culture, all the way from Taylor's scientific management to Rorschach's and Pavlov's psychological experiments. In this respect, montage was seen as a specific psychotechnique meant to directly work on and stimulate the body and mind of the spectator. The cinema as a modern machine was likened to the mind, which was conceived as a similarly modern machine whose functioning, it was believed, could be decoded by science. Montage was seen as the key to understanding the functioning of the mind and the effects of combining specific shots could be ascertained in exact terms. It was through exploring these relations that theory and practice, creating and learning came together up until the mid-1920s when the changed context of film production cut short some of the more radical experiments. In the meantime, these attempts were instrumental in bringing about the astonishing output of the Soviet cinema between 1925 and 1932.

- ing positions throughout the history of audiovisual media. Dispositive, for them, addresses the “epistemic schemas” that at given historical and technical arrangements determine the coming together of spectators, machinery and representations. See François Albera and Maria Tortajada, eds, *Cinema beyond Film: Media Epistemology in the Modern Era* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010).
19. I discuss this mode of vision in more detail in *Mapping the Moving Image: Gesture, Thought and Cinema circa 1900* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010).
  20. See Harun Farocki, “Influences transversales,” trans. Pierre Rusch, *Trafic* 43 (Autumn 2002): 19-24.

## Re-editing as Psychotechnique: Montage and Mediality in Early Soviet Cinema

1. See Yuri Tsivian et al., eds, *Testimoni silenziosi: film russi 1908-1919/Silent Witnesses: Russian Films, 1908-1919* (Pordenone: Edizioni Biblioteca dell'Immagine, 1989).
2. An exception is Walter Benjamin, who mentions Vertov in his Moscow diary of 1927; see Walter Benjamin, “Moskauer Tagebuch,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 6 (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1985), 292-409. An admirable overview of Vertov’s activities in this time can be found in Yuri Tsivian, ed., *Lines of Resistance: Dziga Vertov and the Twenties* (Sacile: Giornate del Cinema Muto, 2004).
3. On Vertov’s travels in Western Europe see Thomas Tode, “Un Soviétique escalade la Tour Eiffel: Dziga Vertov à Paris,” *Cinémathèque* 5 (Spring 1994): 68–85, and Thomas Tode, “Ein Russe projiziert in die Planetariumskuppel. Dsiga Wertows Reise nach Deutschland 1929,” in *Die ungewöhnlichen Abenteuer des Dr. Mabuse im Lande der Bolschewiki*, ed. Oksana Bulgakowa (Berlin: Freunde der Deutschen Kinemathek, 1995), 143–158.
4. Indeed, the recent fascination for Vertov – ranging all the way from Lev Manovich to John MacKay, from Jonathan Beller to Alexander Horwath – might have to do with how his modular-materialist concatenations can be mobilized as a prefiguration and illustration of the digital (or the post-Fordist).
5. See Malte Hagener, *Moving Forward, Looking Back: The European Avant-garde and the Invention of Film Culture, 1919-1939* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007), 171-175.
6. A good account of the re-editing practice for home distribution, but also for export is Yuri Tsivian, “The Wise and Wicked Game: Re-editing and Soviet Film Culture of the 1920s,” *Film History* 8, no. 3 (1996): 327–343.
7. On this work see Jekatarina Chochlowa, “Die erste Filmarbeit Sergej Eisensteins. Die Ummontage des ‘Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler’ von Fritz Lang,” in *Eisenstein und Deutschland. Texte – Dokumente – Briefe*, ed. Oksana Bulgakowa (Berlin: Akademie der Künste/Henschel, 1998), 115-122.
8. Tsivian, “The Wise and Wicked Game,” 336.
9. For the FEKS-strategies borrowed from popular culture see Oksana Bulgakowa, “Das Phänomen FEKS: ‘Boulevardisierung’ der Avantgarde,” *Montage/AV* 2, no. 1 (1993): 94–115. On FEKS in general see Ian Christie, and John Gillett, *Futurism/Formalism/FEKS: Eccentrism and Soviet Cinema, 1918-1936* (London: British Film Insti-

- tute, 1978), Bernadette Poliwoda, *FEKS – Fabrik des exzentrischen Schauspielers. Vom Exzentrismus zur Poetik des Films in der frühen Sowjetkultur* (München: Verlag Otto Sagner, 1994), and Oksana Bulgakowa, *FEKS. Die Fabrik des exzentrischen Schauspielers* (Berlin: Potemkin Press, 1996).
10. For the significance of the music hall for Italian and Russian futurists as well as some relations between classical avant-garde and popular entertainment media see Wanda Strauven, “The Meaning of the Music-hall: From the Italian Futurism to the Soviet Avant-garde,” *Cinéma & Cie* 4 (Spring 2004): 119-134.
  11. See Annie van den Oever, ed., *Ostrannenie: On “Strangeness” and the Moving Image – The History, Reception, and Relevance of a Concept* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010).
  12. See Denise J. Youngblood, *Movies for the Masses: Popular Cinema and Soviet Society in the 1920s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), and Ian Christie and Richard Taylor, eds, *Inside the Film Factory: New Approaches to Russian and Soviet Cinema* (London & New York: Routledge, 1991).
  13. See for a wider contextualization David Bordwell, “The Idea of Montage in Soviet Art and Film,” *Cinema Journal* 11, no. 2 (Spring 1972): 9-17.
  14. Jay Leyda, *Kino: A History of the Russian and Soviet Film* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1960), 175.
  15. See the examples in Evgenij Margolit, “Der sowjetische Stummfilm und der frühe Tonfilm,” in *Geschichte des sowjetischen und russischen Films*, ed. Christine Engel (Stuttgart & Weimar: Metzler, 1999), 17-67, here 23f.
  16. A film like Vsevolod Pudovkin’s *MYEKHANIKA GOLOVNOGO MOZGA* (*MECHANICS OF THE BRAIN*, 1926) could be seen as a perfect illustration of this intersection.
  17. Vance Kepley, Jr., “Building a National Cinema: Soviet Film Education, 1918-1934,” *Wide Angle* 9, no. 3 (1987): 14.
  18. Mikhail Yampolski, “Reality at Second Hand,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 11, no. 2 (1991): 161-171, here 165.
  19. See David Bordwell on “techne-centred aesthetics” in his *The Cinema of Eisenstein* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 35-39.
  20. See Laura Vichi, *Henri Storck. De l’avant-garde au documentaire social* (Crisnée: Éditions Yellow Now, 2002), 23ff
  21. See Günter Agde et al., eds, *Die rote Traumfabrik. Meshrabpom-Film und Prometheus (1921-1936)* (Berlin: Bertz + Fischer 2012).

## Technophobia and Italian Film Theory in the Interwar Period

1. *Technophobia*, in *Collins English Dictionary* (London: Harper Collins, 2013), available at <http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/technophobia?showCookiePolicy=true>.
2. For an extensive account on this debate see Richard Abel, *French Film Theory and Criticism, 1907-1939* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).