

## Plasmatic mimesis: Notes on Eisenstein's (inter)faces

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Why are my drawings, despite a complete lack of anatomical feasibility, humanly physiologically disturbing for viewers? Would it not seem that “non anatomical” means “not imitative”?

Sergei Eisenstein: *Notes on Drawing* (1932)

In a late essay looking back at his formation as a director, Sergei Eisenstein recounts seeing a young boy, the son of an usher, furtively watching one of his rehearsals at the First Proletkult Workers Theater in the early 1920s. On this child's rapt face, he claims to have glimpsed a simultaneous imitation of the total spectacle on stage:

I was struck by the way this boy's face mimetically reflected everything happening on stage, as though it were a mirror. And it was not only the mimicry or actions of one or more of the characters working on stage, but of all and everything simultaneously (2010c, 285–286).

Eisenstein invests this face with the force of an epiphany arriving, he says, like Newton's apocryphal apple, “at the dawn of my creative activity” (285). If Newtonian physics united the mechanics of terrestrial with celestial bodies, Eisenstein's theory of attractions would seek to unite form with effect, an artwork with its influence. Concentrated in this anecdote is the matrix of ideas out of which that famous theory emerged: the mixture of biomechanics, reflexology, and experimental psychology that saturated leftist avant-garde Russian theater during the revolutionary period. Taken as a figure for Eisenstein's idea of the spectator as the “basic material” (2010a, 39) of theater and cinema, the face of the usher's son suggests an eminently malleable substance, less a face perhaps than a bundle of nervous tissue or unconditioned reflexes ripe for training.<sup>1</sup> The naked appearance there of the mimetic influence he calls “motor imitation” is but the visible clue to what could be accomplished with the application of a little force to the harder heads of adult spectators. Here we may invoke all the provocative metaphors the young Eisenstein liked to use for his aggressive stance toward the audience: its psyches must be “plowed” like a field, “forged” like iron, or, if it proves inflexible, its skulls “cut through” by the kino-fist of his cinema of attractions.

Yet this anecdote of the usher's son also marks a distance in both time and thought from that period, even as it evokes it. If we linger a moment on Eisenstein's descrip-

tion of this child's face, conjured up after a quarter century and across the span of his entire filmmaking career, we see that the figure of the spectator it presents is not finally reducible to Eisenstein's early metaphors of the audience as raw material. To begin with, it is a figure with a determinate (albeit generic) form – the face – and not a metaphorical lump of matter to be worked up. What makes this figure so astonishing, however, is that it assumes this form as the bearer of an image that strains the limits not just of facial anatomy but of representation in general. What face, real or imagined, could contain the *simultaneous* imitation of several actors and their expressive gestures individually and together in the total arrangement of the *mise-en-scène* – including, he even suggests, all the inanimate objects on stage? In what sense would it still be a face?

We should recall that by the time Eisenstein fashioned this anecdote, he had long since abandoned his explicit theory of attractions and developed in its place his ideas of “pathos” and “ex-stasis”, effects central to his late writings from the late 1930s to his death, particularly *Nonindifferent Nature* and his luminous notes for a study on Disney. Placed in the context of these later conceptions of effect, the face of the usher's son appears less a figure for “attractational calculation” than an instance of what Eisenstein will come to call “formal ecstasy” (2006, 126). At its most elemental, Eisenstein's idea of ecstasy is synonymous with a pure power of becoming: “a sensing and experiencing of the primal ‘omnipotence’ – the element of ‘coming into being’ – the ‘plasmaticness’ of existence, from which *everything* can arise” (130). In *Nonindifferent Nature*, ecstasy names the state into which a pathos construction transports the spectator. As such it is at once a fusion of the subject with the object and, at the same time, a dissociation or splitting within the subject itself – “in a word,” he writes, “it is everything that forces the viewer to ‘be beside himself’” (1987, 27). In tracing the line of Eisenstein's thought from attractions to pathos and ex-stasis, we might posit something like an axial turn away from the effort to calculate audience effects and toward questions of form, but this turn must be understood as a complex double movement: it is not a matter of Eisenstein simply abandoning the question of effect and the spectator, rather, he continues to pursue it as a matter internal to the problem of form.<sup>2</sup>

Along these lines it might be tempting to read the anecdote of the usher's son as a parable for Eisenstein's encounter, at the cusp of his departure from theater, with the mimetic capacities of the film medium: cinematic mimesis conceived, that is, as the radically non-differentiating capacity to register all aspects of the visible world equally on a single representational plane. We might go further in this vein to locate Eisenstein's anecdote within that lineage of film theorists – from Béla Balázs to Leo Bersani – who have described the face in cinema as a reflective surface analogous to a photosensitive plate, taking the close-up of a face on screen as a kind of immanent expression of its own reverse shot (Balázs 2010; Bersani and Dutoit 2004). But there are good reasons for not assimilating Eisenstein into this tendency to make the face in film an emblem for cinema's perceptual/expressive conditions of possibility. As Noa Steimatsky points out, the face itself is not “a concept that Eisenstein seems to want, or need” (2017, 43). It does not present a privileged instance or site of cinematic specificity, as we find in the early film theories of some of his European contempo-

raries like Jean Epstein in France or Balázs in Germany. Nor is there a conceptual identity between the close-up and the face in Eisenstein, as we find for example in Gilles Deleuze (1986, 99).<sup>3</sup> Rather, the face is one aesthetic figure among others for Eisenstein, even as it is central to several of the traditions – physiognomy, caricature, *commedia dell'arte* – that he draws upon heavily in both his writing and his filmmaking. Arguably, it is through his transformative appropriation of the representational strategies of those pre-cinematic traditions (among others) that Eisenstein developed his approach to the face in film.<sup>4</sup>

What then should we make of the primal scene of mimetic “inter-face” between a spectacle and its reception crystalized in Eisenstein’s anecdote of an accidental spectator’s face?<sup>5</sup> Reducible neither to an allegory for medium specificity nor to the effect of “motor imitation” on the side of the spectator, this scene points to a singular conception of mimesis, one animated by the protean principle Eisenstein calls “plasmaticness.” As this essay aims to show, the paradox or tension inherent in such a conception of mimesis lies in the fact that it depends for its efficacy – its power of “attraction” – on a principle that radically destabilizes the tendency toward imitation or mirroring. One implication of my reading of Eisenstein in this essay is, I hope, to complicate recent attempts to align his theory of attractions with certain conceptions of mimesis in contemporary neuroscience, as though he were, for example, a discoverer of “mirror neurons” *avant la lettre* (see Belodubrovskaya 2018; Plantinga 2009; Tikka 2008). Against the static repetition implied in such notions of mirroring, *plasmatic mimesis* posits a kind of metastatic asymmetry between form and effect.

Eisenstein refers to just such an asymmetry in the epigraph above about his idiosyncratic style of contour drawing. The question he poses there and in much of his later writing is how such forms can nevertheless produce a mimetic effect of attraction. His answer is that they are “protoplasmatic, *avant tout*” (2006, 186). Eisenstein provides his typically capacious genealogy of examples of this “protoplasmatic” quality: from 19th century etchings of Geishas with elastic “many-metred arms” by the Japanese woodcut maker Toyohiro to the German cartoonist Walter Trier who illustrated Erich Kästner’s children’s book *Arthur mit dem langen Arm* (Arthur with the Long Arm, 1931) and literary examples from Balzac’s image of “shrinking skin” in *La Peau de chagrin* (1831) to Alice’s potion-induced shrinking and growing in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) (95–103). Such images of “plasmaticness” are, Eisenstein claims, at once “profound in thought and irresistibly attractive and exciting in form” (101).

And you cannot help but arrive at the conclusion that a single, common prerequisite of attractiveness shows through in all these examples: a rejection of once-and-forever allotted form, freedom from ossification, the ability to assume dynamically any form (101).

The face, of course, is one such possible form. But it is also a privileged site for mimesis-as-mirroring in cinema and audio-visual media generally. Thinking the face through Eisenstein’s principle of “plasmaticness” means not only decentering this privileged status but also opening it up to the horizon of “formal ecstasy”. Seen as one form among others the face assumes the capacity of all form not simply to mimic but to ex-statically stand beyond and beside itself.

## THE AUDIENCE: FROM CALCULATION TO EX-STASIS

Although Eisenstein dramatizes his anecdote of the usher's son by presenting it as a scene of chance discovery, he had in fact systematically integrated the direct observation of audience reaction into his production methods at the Proletkult theater. One of his students there later recalled how Eisenstein would "sit with his back to the stage, facing the audience, and proceeding from the dramaturgy of the production to observe the spectators in order at the proper moment to give them a portion of tears or an armful of laughter, and occasionally force them to leap out of their seats in horror. This is how the famous theory of the Montage of Attractions came into being [...]" (Levshin 1996, 170). Indeed, this story itself engages in a bit of Eisensteinian mythmaking in that the practice was not Eisenstein's invention. The attempt to calculate the reactions of the audience through direct empirical observation was a widespread practice in Soviet theater and film productions of the period. During the 1924/25 season of Meyerhold's theater, for example, analysts prepared charts for each play on which they would note the correlation between concrete stimuli and a set of audience reactions (standardized into categories ranging from "silence" or "laughter" to "leaving the auditorium" or "climbing up on stage"), noting as well the social composition of the particular audience (i. e. "students" or "workers," etc.) (Kleberg 1982, 232–233). And already in 1920, Lenin's "Directives Concerning the Work of Agitational-Instructional Trains and Steamboats" had ordered officials to "[p]ay attention to the necessity of painstaking selection of films and the calculation of the action of each film on the public during its projection" (Nesbet 2003, 51).

In "The Method of Making a Workers' Film", Eisenstein reports the results of his own informal attempt at empirical audience research after screening his film *Stachka* (*Strike*, 1925) in a worker's neighborhood. He notes in particular the "hilarious failure" (2010a, 65) of the sequence at the end of the film, in which footage of a bull being slaughtered is intercut with a staged scene in long-shot of striking workers gunned down *en masse*. Although it proved scandalously effective for bourgeois censors – Eisenstein claims it was "responsible for 50 percent of the opposition to the film" (2010a, 63) – on the audience of workers "the slaughter *did not have* a 'bloody' effect for the simple reason that the worker associates a bull's blood above all with the processing plants near a slaughter-house!" (65). With that audience, the attraction missed hearts for stomachs: rather than creating its intended impression of brutal repression, the documentary images of slaughter brought to mind "beef and cutlets" (quoted in Nesbet 2003, 48).

At this point in his thought in the mid-1920s, Eisenstein uses the episode to demonstrate the necessity of aligning attractions to an audience on the basis of "class character" (*klassovost*). He acknowledges the difficulty of achieving such alignment; even within the working class he notes the existence of finely grained differences, such as between the reactions of metal versus textile workers to an identical show in a club. The only sure solution to the unpredictability of heterogeneous reception was for the audience to be "known and selected in advance for its homogeneity" (2010a, 41). Eisenstein describes his technique of typage in terms of such an alignment between attraction and audience: "in typage you invariably present a particular

audience with a face that expresses everything on the basis of social experience (and not only social but also biological experience)” (2010c, 9).<sup>6</sup> We will return below to the curious addition of “biological experience”, but for the moment I want to focus on the function of “social experience” here.

We can see how this works by comparing typage to a proximate concept in Marxist theory – Lukács’s idea of “typicality” – first elaborated as part of his account of class consciousness during the same period as Eisenstein’s theory of attractions. In *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein* (1923; *History and Class Consciousness*, 1971), Lukács interpolates “type” and “typicality” into Lenin’s definition of classes from his famous *Great Beginning* pamphlet of 1919 (Eiden-Offe 2011). In this way, Lukács (re)describes classes as “clearly distinguished basic types whose characteristics are determined by the types of position available in the process of production. Now class consciousness consists in the fact of the appropriate and rational reactions ‘imputed’ to a particular typical position in the process of production” (1971, 51). The perfect calculation of an attraction would require a work precisely suited to the set of dispositions and capacities “imputed” to these fixed social types. To succeed, typage would require not only the representation of social types but also the social typing of the audience for whom those representations would have the calculated effect.

No doubt, the very idea that it is possible to calculate precisely and in advance the effect a work will have on an audience is highly questionable (as the necessity of verification through empirical observation betrays). And in pondering Eisenstein’s abandonment of “attractional calculation” one could certainly speculate on the impact on his thought of the failure of his films to ever attract a truly popular audience in the Soviet Union. But it is perhaps more fruitful to consider how that abandonment might be seen as an immanent, if not inevitable, outcome of a deeper tension in his thought. What would it mean for the artwork to align perfectly with an audience? Such an adequation of form to spectator would entail precisely the kind of static effect that Eisenstein finds anathema to artistic production: “It is only a dull, sterile, feeble, parasitic art form that lives by exploiting the existing stock of associations and reflexes, without using them to create chains of new images which form themselves into new concepts” (2010b, 261). In the very attempt to bridge the interval between form and effect, the calculation of attractions risks reifying it as a purely external relation between artwork and spectator, which at its height can only achieve a parasitic mirroring of the pre-given consciousness – repetition without a difference. The question for art is how to create a *transformative* attraction.

In the following section, I will trace one answer to that question along a rather serpentine line linking Eisenstein’s use of animality and superimposition as a strategy of typage in his film *Strike* to his fascination with Disney’s style of animation, which utilizes “the continuous transformation of the ‘animated’ contour line” (Kleiman 2006, 81). Significantly, he calls this “writhing” style of animation “a plasmaticness of contour” (125). One of his accounts (among many) of the attractiveness found there identifies two distinct sources: one social, the other biological. The social account concerns the specific attraction of Disney in American society, namely that the plasmatic “diversity of form” is appealing precisely as the anthesis to a “social order with

such a mercilessly standardized and mechanically measured existence” (103). That is, rather than fixing its audience into a standard set of social types, as we saw above, the attraction of Disney depends upon a “formal ecstasy” which transports the audience beyond and beside itself. The biological account, on the other hand, taps into a deep, animal level of affinity with the plasmatic image. Here Eisenstein posits the idea of a “cellular” memory capable of recalling its own existence at every stage of its evolutionary development. Taken together, these two sources of plasmatic attractiveness suggest a radically different reading of Eisenstein’s claim that in typepage the face expresses everything on “the basis of social experience (and not only social but also biological experience)” (2010c, 9). That is the reading I will turn to now.

### ANIMAL TYPES: ZOOMORPHISM AND SUPERIMPOSITION IN *STRIKE*

“As soon as I crossed over into cinema,” Eisenstein recalls in the early 1930s, “I threw myself into typepage” (2010c, 11). In fact, his first film *Strike* (1925) is not only populated by types, its entire construction is a form of typepage. As critics have long noted, the six-part structure of *Strike*’s plot “schematizes the typical stages, tests and crises through which a strike must pass” (Bordwell 1993, 11) and in so doing organizes itself as a kind of manual or guidebook. Undertaken in what Eisenstein calls “the ‘how to make’ a *revolution* mode” (2016, 247; emphasis in the original), *Strike* follows *The Communist Manifesto* to the letter in its designation of the parts the bourgeoisie, the workers, and the lumpenproletariat play within the class struggle. Each of these classes receives its own typepage treatment from Eisenstein. In what follows, I will focus on a sequence early in the film in which the criminal members of the lumpenproletariat are introduced to perform their role in the class struggle assigned to them by Marx and Engels as “a bribed tool of reactionary intrigue” (1978, 482).

Tasked with infiltrating the factory district, an official of the secret police examines a photo catalogue of private agents. As a page of this catalogue appears in full screen with four portraits mounted in the style of a rogue’s gallery, the officer’s hand enters the frame and taps each portrait in turn with a pencil. Like a magician’s pledge, this gesture demonstrates for the audience that this is indeed an ordinary sheet of still photographs (Fig. 1). An intertitle then assigns animal monikers or “totems” to the figures pictured there – The Monkey, The Bulldog, The Fox, The Owl (Fig. 2). When the film cuts back, these portraits suddenly burst into motion, their faces miming manic expressions as their heads and torsos jut forward and side-to-side, breaking through the flat plane of the page (Fig. 3). Throughout *Strike* Eisenstein delights in the use of intertitles to pun upon visual metaphors – we can think, for example, of the scene when the factory director kicks his chair off of a balcony in disgust followed by the line, “[t]heir thrones rest on the labor of the workers,” or when ink spelled over a map of the factory district is followed by “the streets running with blood.” Likewise, the animation of the agents in the rogue’s gallery is readable as what he sometimes calls a literalized (or “reverse”) metaphor – the animal totems in the intertitle acting as a catalyst for the *animistic* transformation of still to moving image.



Fig. 1

**ROSTER OF  
UNDERCOVER AGENTS:  
THE MONKEY, THE QUIET  
ONE, THE PATRIARCH,  
THE FELLOW-COUNTRYMAN,  
ZOYA, THE BULLDOG,  
THE FOX, THE TAILOR,  
THE SHEPHERD, THE OWL,  
AND THE FLY-BY-NIGHT.**

Fig. 2



Fig. 3

In the sequence immediately following, *Strike* pursues the optical procedure of literalizing metaphors through a series of lap dissolves that superimpose medium close-ups of human faces over shots of animals. The quasi-diegetic motivation for this sequence is Bulldog's visit to a pet shop directly following his appearance in the office of the secret police. Arranged by an establishing shot into the tableau of a bestiary (Fig. 4), the pet shop displays live incarnations of the animals used as totems for the agents. Each is singled out in its turn by the camera and fused with its human analogue. First, we see the face of a fox dissolve into the face of a young man with foxlike features (Figs. 5–7). After an intertitle repeats his moniker, we see “The Fox” in a room busily disguising himself as a blind beggar in order to eavesdrop on the workers as they meet in the street to organize. The pattern repeats for “The Owl”, who rouses himself from bed and perches on a roof overlooking a workers’ meeting place, “The Monkey”, who poses as a peddler of shaved ice and approaches a group of workers conspiring on a sidewalk curb, and finally, “The Bulldog” himself, whose purpose for visiting the pet shop is revealed, at the end of the sequence, as procuring a performing bear to serve as his own pretext for mingling among the workers.



Fig. 4

This sequence in *Strike* makes recourse to one of the oldest representational strategies of physiognomy – the morphological comparison of humans and animals. Zoological physiognomics has a pedigree in Western thought traceable to the very origins of physiognomy in fifth century B.C. Already in the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle mentions the technique of a physiognomist who reads human faces according to the purported simpler structure of two or three basic animals. This classical zoological strain reaches an aesthetic apotheosis in Charles Le Brun’s great *Conférence sur l’expression générale et particulière* (1698) (Magli, 1989). In terms of Eisenstein’s own formation, we can place the animal typage in *Strike* in a series that includes his own childhood drawings, “In the World of Animals” (see Fig. 8) as well as his lifelong fondness for the animal epos and the caricatures of Grandville. Eisenstein’s appropriation of this established strain of physiognomy poses our central question with a renewed force. That is, how does an attraction like typage function not simply as a form of static repetition, rein-



forcing rather than transforming the responses of an audience? To glimpse the political stakes of this question, one has only to recall the history of zoological physiognomy in the production of the most heinous racist and antisemitic forms of caricature.



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7

In its didactic/agitational function, the animal typing in the bestiary sequence of the film begs comparison with that other, more infamous association between humans and animals at the end of the film: the abattoir sequence in which the slaughter of striking workers is cross-cut with the slaughter of a bull, which Eisenstein called a “hilarious failure” when it was screened for an audience of workers. As we have already seen, the failure of that latter sequence to produce its calculated effect can be understood in terms of a misalignment in the external relation between a specific attraction and a given audience. The chain of associations in this case merely provoked hunger rather than the intended outrage. Without making any empirical claims about the comparative effects of the bestiary sequence on audiences, it is worth lingering on its difference as a formal operation from the association between humans and animals produced in the abattoir sequence. While the latter montage utilizes cross-cutting, the former produces its association through superimposition (specifically, a lap dissolve). As a technique for producing a “montage of association”, the cross-cut always entails the possibility that the related associations will misalign in the spectator’s mind. In the superimposition of a lap dissolve, the association produced is internal to the shot and, moreover, at the midpoint both images are equally exposed so that the features of animal and human combine in a single heterogenous ensemble (see Fig. 6).



Fig. 8: Eisenstein’s “In the World of Animals”. Riga 1913–1914.

Without wanting to overdetermine the meaning of any particular film technique for Eisenstein, it is worth noting that he would go on to conceive of superimposition

itself in terms of a (reversible) genetic progression from animal to human. Nearly a decade after making *Strike*, he composed a short, occasional essay on the technique of superimposition entitled “Georges Méliès’s Mistake” (1933) as the preface for a book by Vladimir Nilsen on trick photography. He begins the essay by likening the storied origin of superimposition – Méliès’s fortuitous “mistake” of double exposing a strip of film – to the accidental coupling of a horse with a donkey that produced the first mule. Just as the mule endured because it happened to meet the economic needs of the social structure, the accident of superimposition became part of cinema’s visual repertoire because of its expressive relation to the “structure of our process of perception in general” (2010a, 258). Thus Eisenstein tells this moment of invention in the history of cinema as a story of a contingency becoming necessity. On one level, superimposition is simply one technical device among others, catalogued under “special effects” (2016, 172) in his unfinished *Notes for a General History of Cinema* (1946–1948). On a higher level, however, it is nothing less than the basis for the *Urphänomen* of film, the theory of which Eisenstein began to develop in “Beyond the Shot” (1929) and explored much more elaborately in “Montage 1937”. In that latter work, Eisenstein observes that the “depiction of phylogenesis inevitably summons up an autogenetic image” (2010b, 49). His little essay on superimposition, written several years earlier, provides a stunning example of just such an image, in which the phylogenetic evolution of human perception is depicted via an autogenetic image of facial morphology:

The eyes of a fish stare motionless to the side in diametrically opposite directions. Since its two fields of vision never cross, a fish is deprived of the opportunity of perceiving space stereoscopically. It would have to pick its way painfully through the scale of the evolution of species so that, when it reached the half-way stage of the ape on its way towards mankind, its eyes would move from the side of its head to join in the middle of its snout and form a face (258).<sup>7</sup>

To achieve stereoscopic perception is to grow a face! Superimposition is the counterpart, on the side of the image, to this same phylogenetic process: “As we can see, the method of superimposing one image upon another is like a copy of all the progressive stages in a single historical process towards the assimilation and realization of reality” (260). But unlike stereoscopic cinema, a superimposed image does not directly mimic the apparatus of binocular vision by reproducing the three-dimensionality of natural perception. Rather, an image of superimposition bears the same relation to stereoscopic cinema as a multiphase drawing does to the cinematic illusion of movement. Just as the multiphase drawing presents the principle of movement in cinema without its direct impression, a superimposed image gives us the principle of stereoscopic vision without the experience of 3D. In order to make that principle available to the higher faculty of “speculative representation”, superimposition “is forced to slip back into the deconstruction of a three-dimensional body into two flat images” (259). Readers of Eisenstein will likely recognize in this dyadic structure of simultaneous progression and regression a variation of what he will come to call the *Grundproblem* of art.<sup>8</sup> In the case of the superimposed images of human and animal faces in *Strike* we have a precise enactment of this dynamic. Once again, Eisenstein’s writings on

Disney provide insight here, specifically what he considers to be their distinguishing capacity to reverse anthropomorphism into “zoomorphism”. The attraction of Disney’s Bambi is not so much that she is a “humanized deer” but “*Rückgänglich* [conversely] a ‘redeerised’ human” (2006, 148). The point is not to project the qualities of the animal onto the human but to produce an image of the deer *in* the human.

What Eisenstein apprehends in Disney’s animated line – and the elective affinity he finds with his own contour drawing – is not ultimately about the representation of animal or human figures *per se* but rather a peculiar formal capacity to present, at once, both a definite form *and* the protean principle to assume any form:

An ability that I would call “plasmaticness,” for here we have a being represented in drawing, a being of definite form, a being which has attained a definite appearance, and which behaves like the primal protoplasm, not yet possessing a “stable” form, but capable of assuming any form and which, skipping along the rungs of the evolutionary ladder, attaches itself to any and all forms of animal existence (2006, 101).

We can understand this double capacity in the terms of Luka Arsenjuk’s recent theorization of Eisenstein’s major cinematic concepts as “unities concretized through the form of contradiction” (2018, 18). The Eisensteinian concept in question here is movement. Plasmaticity names the apprehension of movement as primary and non-external to the figure, as a protean force of sheer change and becoming from which figures coalesce and dissolve. And yet, “[s]omething of the figure resists” (34); there is, as Eisenstein asserts above, “a being represented [...] which has attained a definite appearance”. Eisensteinian movement, in Arsenjuk’s brilliant conceptualization, is “both something absolute, a pure *figurability* or indeterminacy of things, and something that must necessarily take the shape of a determinate visible *figure*” (18).<sup>9</sup>

Something like that constitutive contradiction – which puts the “figure-in-crisis” (23) – is essential to the notion of an asymmetry between form and effect that I’ve tried to elucidate here in the paradoxical concept of “plasmatic mimesis”. Indeed, just as it is possible to imagine the alignment or misalignment of a static form with a static determination of the audience, it is also possible to imagine a mimetic interface that would consist of a seamless mirroring of infinite malleability on both sides. This too would be a kind of repetition without difference. Yet (to allude once more to Arsenjuk): something of the interface resists. To illustrate, I want to turn now by way of conclusion to another one of Eisenstein’s anecdotes about audience response that recalls the story of the face of the usher’s son with which we began.

### CONCLUSION: PLASMATIC MIMESIS

Like that story, this anecdote takes place in the theater and is told retrospectively by Eisenstein long after he had crossed over into cinema. It is not centered on an individual face, however, rather on a collective of gesturing hands. During a 1935 lecture on expressive movement he recalls for his students seeing a silent performance of a play in which both the actors and the audience were composed entirely of “deaf-mutes”. He provides no details as to the time, location, subject matter, or name of the play itself. As with the usher’s son, his attention is focused not on the stage but on

the audience in which he witnesses “the most passionate expression of emotion [...] through its agitated silence” (1996b, 198).

That was an astonishing spectacle (not so much the actors as the audience) [...]. Hundreds of flashing hands synchronically shooting out and going back. It made the audience look like that narrow band of the Pacific Ocean shoreline somewhere on the Mexican coast where millions of birds are flying about, reminding us with their thousands of flapping wings of an unending whirlpool (198).

This remarkable scene brings into direct contact his early work on expressive gesture and his late discussions of drawing and ecstasy. Significantly, Eisenstein conjures Mexico, the place where he found time and space to pursue his youthful habit of drawing with renewed intensity (Goodwin, 1993, 19). Indeed, this image brings to mind precisely what Eisenstein identifies as the essential attraction of his own contour drawing and of Disney alike: the figuration of human hands as birds in flight recalls the plasmatic capability “of assuming any form and which, skipping along the rungs of the evolutionary ladder, attaches itself to any and all forms of animal existence” (2006, 101). Thus, we might well count this “astonishing spectacle” of mimetic interface among Eisenstein’s instances of “formal ecstasy” – the image of an audience standing beside itself as a plastic organic form, one that leaps illogically from “hundreds” of human hands to “millions” of birds with “thousands” of wings all moving together like an “unending whirlpool”.

If we posit something like a speculative superimposition of this scene with the earlier image of the usher’s son at Proletkult, what image, or rather, what concept of mimesis emerges? An ensemble of gestures that ecstatically transform the determinate codes of sign language into an array of natural figures. A face that simultaneously mimics every object and action on stage while somehow remaining a face. Individually and together, these impossible images put into play at the level of interface the essential contradiction Arsenjuk identifies between figurability and figure. In so doing, they enable us to think a plasmatic concept of mimesis that exceeds mere mirroring.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In his 1924 manifesto “The Montage of Film Attractions”, Eisenstein declares that theater is “linked to cinema by a common (identical) *basic material* – *the audience* – and by a common purpose – *influencing this audience in the desired direction* through a series of calculated pressures on its psyche” (2010a, 39).

- <sup>2</sup> Perhaps the most radical recent attempt to make effect a problem internal to form is Eugenie Brinkema's *The Forms of the Affects* (2014). Indeed, Brinkema takes this trajectory to its limit by bracketing the question of the spectator entirely in her astonishing readings of film forms.
- <sup>3</sup> "There is no close-up of the face. The close-up is the face [...]" (Deleuze, 1986, 99).
- <sup>4</sup> Indeed, Eisenstein's entire approach to the medium of film stands out in the so-called "classical" era of film theory for what Mikhail Yampolsky has described as his "radical denial of the usual notion of cinematic mimesis" (1993, 177).
- <sup>5</sup> For a rather different reading of Eisenstein's conception of mimesis crystalized in this scene, see Rancière 2006, 23–24.
- <sup>6</sup> For a fuller account of Eisenstein's theory and practice of typage during the span of his career, see Geil 2016.
- <sup>7</sup> This image is in fact a facialized variation upon the conquering of the vertical posture that appears in "Montage 1937": "The animal, as it climbed up the evolutionary ladder, straightened out its spine and stood up on two legs in the vertical position" (2010b, 49).
- <sup>8</sup> Eisenstein provides his first full formulation of the *Grundproblem* in his 1935 address to the All Union Creative Conference of Soviet Filmworkers: "The dialectic of a work of art is constructed upon a most interesting 'dyad.' The effect of a work of art is built upon the fact that two processes are taking place within it simultaneously. There is a determined progressive ascent towards ideas at the highest peaks of consciousness and at the same time there is a penetration through the structure of form into the deepest layer of emotional thinking" (2010c, 38).
- <sup>9</sup> In an analogous vein, see also Hannah Frank's (2019) complication of any simplistic association of plasmaticity with a notion of an infinite mutability of motion in her book on classical-era animated cartoons.

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Sergei Eisenstein. Mimesis. Spectatorship. Face. Typage. "Strike" (film).

This essay explores the question of (inter)faces as a problem of mimetic form in the work of Sergei Eisenstein. While Eisenstein's early theory of attractions emphasizes the production of audience effects through "motor imitation," his later writings appear to depart from this model for sake of a notion of "ex-stasis" that would transport the spectator out of her or his current state. These two sides of Eisenstein's thought are brought together here in the concept of "plasmatic mimesis," which is explored through the figure of the face in a number of his theoretical texts and his first film *Strike* (1925). By taking up the device most associated with the face in Eisenstein – typage – and reading a specific instance in *Strike*'s superimposition of animal and human faces, this essay ultimately aims to decenter the face as a privileged site for mimesis-as-mirroring in cinema and audio-visual media. Thinking the face through concept of "plasmatic mimesis" makes it into one form among others but in doing so it frees the face to assume the principle Eisenstein calls "formal ecstasy": the capacity of all form not simply to mimic but to ex-statically stand beside and beyond itself.

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