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Disassembling and Recomposing.
The Real in the Filmic Image

Introduction

The first decades of the twentieth century were years of strong experimentation and avant-garde, in which the concept of montage was a major player, from Bertolt Brecht's theatre to Raoul Hausmann's dadaist collages. In philosophy, there is no shortage of those who have used montage as a fundamental tool for their theories – the German critic and philosopher Walter Benjamin certainly being among the most important ones. His great unfinished *Arcades Project* laid out a very specific methodology: «Method of this project: literary montage. I needn't say anything. Merely show»[1]. The importance of montage in his thought, however, is not limited to the articulate and sophisticated use of quotations and references in said text: in fact, one can go so far as to say that his entire philosophical system can be centered around a certain conception of montage, both as a destructive and revealing act.

The art and cinema of another great protagonist of early 20th century, Sergei Ejzenštejn, can be analysed in this light: destructive and edifying, aestheticising but, at the same time, truly realist. The aim of this text is exactly to delve into Ejzenštejn's idea of montage, not simply to highlight the differences and convergences between him and Benjamin, but to generally describe montage as one peculiar way to conceive the world in the first half of last century – a method that, from philosophy of history to cinema theory, was crucial for conceiving an innovative understanding of time, space, and history.

In order to do so, we first would like to dwell on the concept of constellation within Benjamin's philosophy: showing the importance of the act of montage in the German philosopher's thought does not imply a straightforward parallelism between him and Ejzenštejn, but it will help to build the philosophical methodology of our discourse. Ejzenštejn's conception of montage, then, becomes the core focus of the text. However, instead

Abstract

Starting with an analysis of the concept of constellation in Walter Benjamin's theory, the aim of this text is to elucidate how montage can be considered a foundational act of art and philosophy in the last century. The majority of the article is devoted to the theory of Russian film director Sergei Ejzenštejn, with a particular focus on his conceptualisation of the image and the value he ascribed to film montage. This article focuses on one of Ejzenštejn's masterpieces, *October*, and elucidates the relationship between reality and fiction within the film medium. It demonstrates how the director overcomes this dualism through montage, which is not merely an aesthetic technique but a foundational act.

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1 W. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge-MA 2003, p. 860.

of mainly addressing the dialectical value of the Ejzenštejnian method, the text emphasises the destructive and creative potential of the filmmaker's editing: a new way of constituting the real, going beyond the dualism between documentary and formalism.

Consequently, through the analysis of one specific film of his, *October*, we will bring to the fore how the tension between formalism and realism, profilmic and filmic lies at the heart of the director's work: a new conception of meaning that does not mimic reality but neither does it want to distance itself from it.

Benjamin, history and the constellation

A particularly hostile but illuminating text, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* presents observations that are very useful for understanding Benjamin's peculiar philosophical system. In the famous introduction, the German critic dedicates few insights for defining the crucial figure of constellation, described as a «configuration of phenomenal elements, which serves to present the idea»[2]. As he famously states in his usual poetic tones: «ideas are to objects as constellations are to starts»[3]: Benjamin's idea does not represent neither the law of the phenomena or just their transcendental container: rather it is best understood as a «mosaic», i.e, a «particular formation or pattern adopted by a set of fragments» that is able to «manifest itself only within them»[4].

According to Susann-Buck Morss, Benjamin's theory of ideas is a «remarkable inversion of Platonism»[5]. If for the ancient

2 P. Schwebel, *Constellation and Expression in Leibniz and Benjamin,* in N. Sahraoui, C. Sauter (ed.), *Thinking in Constellation. Walter Benjamin in the Humanities*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne 2018, p. 58.

3 W. Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge-MA 2003, p. 34.

4 G. Gilloch, *Walter Benjamin: Critical Constellations,* Polity Press, Cambridge-MA 2002, p. 70.

5 S. Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectic: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt Institute,* Free Press, New York 1979, p. 91. Buck-Morss

philosopher the idea appears as truth in the phenomena, for the German thinker the truth content of each phenomenon is expressed in the idea they come to compose in a constellation: «to constellate is to name an idea and thereby recover its essence as truth»[6]. How, then, can the constellation come to be? This process should not be thought as an act of knowledge in which the critic can fully possess the empirical object and, consequently, reveal its truth. On the contrary, «truth becomes manifest not so much in a process of successive reflection, as in the moment of destruction»[7]. Within this *pars destruens* lies an integral part of the formation of the idea: extrapolating historically charged elements to uncover their truth by assembling them in a new configuration. Consequently, constellation should be considered a «destructive weapon, an instrument to be wielded against system and above all against systematic philosophy: it is meant to break up the homogeneity of philosophical language»[8].

This system of analysis is not restricted uniquely to art criticism and philosophy. Quite the contrary, Benjamin adopted it to constitute a new approach to historical materialism and to philosophy of history in general. In his *Thesis on the Concept of History*, the German thinker criticises the conception of progress installed by historicism, seen as a linear articulation of time and as the expression of a «triumphal procession»[9] of the historical rulers. In such framework, time is considered «homogenous»[10] and «empty»[11] exactly because every moment of the past is seen as concluded, exhausted in the present: a

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describes how Benjamin's theory «provided a groundwork for nothing less than a non-metaphysical metaphysic» (*Ivi*, p. 93). Benjamin's constellations become, in their reverse Platonism and their antidealism, a perfect «tool for materialist enlightenment» (*ibidem*).

6 F. Jameson, *The Benjamin Files*, Verso Books, London 2020, p. 86.

7 G. Gilloch, *Walter Benjamin: Critical Constellations*, cit., p. 77.

8 F. Jameson, *The Benjamin Files*, cit., p. 17.

9 W. Benjamin, *et al.*, *Selected Writings. Vol. 4, 1938-1940,* Harvard University Press, London 2003, p. 391.

10 *Ivi*, p. 395.

11 *Ibidem.*

building block for the construction of a present seen as the last moment of a perpetuating and linear universal history.

Against the incessant flow of time of the historicist, who considers «the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary»[12], Benjamin introduces instead a moment of arrest, of disruption of this continuity, that he called *Jeztz-Zeit*, the Now-Time. An instant in which a sudden relation of what-has-been with the present moment is not purely chronological: it «is not progression but image»[13]. In the materialism of the theses, as Timothy Bathi has reminded us, «the material is that of the *Bild* or the image, and the activity of the historical materialist is image making»[14].

It is in this context, then, that Benjamin's phrase «history decays into images, not into stories»[15] should be interpreted: it is the historian's task to be able to intercept these images into which history decays and to manifest their truth content. When we encounter images, as art historian Georges Didi-Huberman reminds us, we are always in front of time itself.

It is just through images that the past can be recognized in the present. However, as underlined by Lindroos, this does not indicate that the image is «an immediate window» to the past, «since Benjamin does not conceive of the reality as constant or pre-existent»[16]. Rather, reality is to be seen as «a configuration that becomes possible to decipher in the moment of insight»[17].

This fundamental act of image making is, for Benjamin, the act in which «what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation»[18]. Within this configuration, the

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12 W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings. Vol. 4, 1938-1940*, cit, p. 397.

13 W. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, cit., p. 462.

14 T. Bathi, *History as Rhetorical Enactment: Walter Benjamin's Theses "On the Concept of History"*, «Diacritics», Vol. 9, n. 3, 1979, p. 11.

15 W. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, cit., p. 476.

16 K. Lindroos, *Now-Time Image-Space: Temporalization of Politics in Walter Benjamin's Philosophy of History and Art*, University Of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä, 1998, p. 201.

17 *Ibidem*.

18 W. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, cit., p. 462.

present does not completely possess past moments: something of the latter always escapes, always spills out of the continuum of history, leaving the past as an incomplete task. If the progress is seen as «the storm»[19] that does not allow the historical materialist to restore the «debris of history»[20], Benjamin's dialectical image is the arrest of this storm, in which, in a particular «moment of recognizability»[21], one shred of the past can be put in relation to a moment in the present, unsettling the latter and redeeming the former.

It is a moment of disruption of chronological time: an historical truth does not dwell in a present that subjugates every preceding moment, as it does not lie in a past seen as concluded. It reveals itself in a constellation, since for Benjamin «ideas are timeless constellations, and by virtue of the elements being seen as points in such constellations, phenomena are subdivided and redeemed»[22]. As rightly pointed out by Fredric Jameson, a constellation should be considered as «a kind of montage […] whose figural implication lies in difference rather than in identity»[23].

Within these differences, this act of montage opens up to an «anachronistic historicity», exactly because «it brings together and, so to speak, conflates contradictory ontological modes»[24].

A montage that «shows us that perhaps things are not what they are, and that it is up to us to see them otherwise according to the new arrangement suggested by the critical image achieved by this very montage»[25]: putting in relation apparently different component, it shares light what Angela Mengoni has

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19 W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings. Vol. 4, 1938-1940*, cit., p. 392.
20 *Ibidem*.
21 *Ivi*, p. 265.
22 W. Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, cit., p. 34.
23 F. Jameson, *The Benjamin Files*, cit., p. 87.
24 F. Agnellini, *Introduzione. Piccole Utopie Clandestine*, in G. Didi-Huberman, *Quando Le Immagini Prendono Posizione. L'occhio della Storia*, Mimesis, Sesto San Giovanni 2018, pp. 5-19, p. 12 (Our translation).
25 G. Didi-Huberman, *Quand Les Images Prennent Position. L'oeil de L'Histoire*, Les Éditions de Minuit, Paris 2009, p. 68.

called the «*la necessità dell'anacronismo*»[26] and that, instead, Didi-Huberman labeled the «*fecondité de l'anachronisme*»[27]. Thus, there is a necessity to produce «new regions of meaning in both the objects of the past and those of the present», within an act of montage that expresses «temporal condensations that extend beyond the historical genesis and beyond the diachronic connections that produced it»[28].

The montage as la methode moderne par excellence

In the first decades of the 20th century, montage became a crucial device through which to try to understand contemporaneity. The French critic Didi-Huberman has outlined a suggestive parallel between the gash of trenches dug during the First World War and the growing need, from the first half of the century, «to show through assemblages, that is, through dislocations and re-compositions of everything»[29]. A break emerged in the way in which aesthetics was conceived, intended as knowledge of the sensible world – as experience: montage thus becomes a cognitive method and a formal procedure that stems from the consequences of the Great War, from the acknowledgement of the «disorder of the world»[30].

A similar change was grasped by Benjamin in his text from 1933, *Experience and Poverty*. For the first time in history, according to the German thinker, people returning from the trenches were «not richer but poorer in communicable experience»[31].

26 A. Mengoni, *Anacronismi, tra semiotica e teoria delle immagini*, «Carte Semiotiche», vol. 1, 2013, pp. 12-19.

27 G. Didi-Huberman, *Devant Le Temps*, Les Éditions de Minuit, Paris 2000, p. 20.

28 A. Mengoni, *Anacronismi, tra semiotica e teoria delle immagini*, cit., p. 13.

29 G. Didi-Huberman, *Quand Les Images Prennent Position. L'oeil de L'Histoire*, cit., p. 71.

30 *Ibidem*.

31 W. Benjamin, *et al.*, *Selected Writings Vol. 2, Part 2 1931 - 1934*, Harvard Uiversity Press, London 2005, p. 173.

Benjamin thus underlines a distinction already present in late 19th century's aesthetic theory that identified two different types of experience: *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*. If the first term was associated with an «immediate, passive, fragmented, isolated, and unintegrated inner experience»[32], the second was seen as «the cumulative, totalizing accretion of transmittable wisdom, of epic truth»: «*Erfahrung* was something no longer available to the individual in the modern world»[33], shattered by the annihilating experience of the Great War and the new mass media and its constant shocks. With its fragmentation, its breaks and discontinuities, *Erlebnis* was ultimately taken as the paradigmatic experience of that century. Following Didi-Huberman, then, montage must be regarded as the «*methode modern par excellence*»[34].

But Benjamin was not the only one to establish montage in his aesthetic-philosophical theories. In fact, among the great intellectuals of the beginning of the last century who focused their thinking on the concept of montage, such as Bertolt Brecht, Carl Einstein or even Aby Warburg, of particular note is the figure of the Russian film director Sergei Ejzenštejn.

Montage, according to Ejzenštejn, is not merely a modern method of representation: it is a timeless mode of expression that the director places in mythology and yet finds its ultimate expression in cinema, the art of the last century. In one of his writings, Ejzenštejn describes how montage really stems from a primordial act of dismemberment that prelude to a new unity that «might be reunited in some superior new quality»[35]. A primordial act with its origin in the myth of Dionysus.

> We are at once reminded of the myths and mysteries of Dionysus, of Dionysus being torn to pieces and the

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32 T. Elsaesser, *Between Erlebnis and Erfahrung: Cinema Experience with Benjamin*, «Paragraph», vol. 32, n. 3, 2009, pp. 292-312, p. 294.

33 *Ibidem*.

34 G. Didi-Huberman, *Quand Les Images Prennent Position. L'oeil de L'Histoire*, cit., p. 86

35 S. Ejzenštejn, *Towards a Theory of Montage: Sergei Ejzenštejn Selected Works. Volume 2*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010, p. 168.

> pieces being reconstituted in the transfigured Dionysus.
> Here we are at the very threshold of the art of theatre
> which in time was to become the art of cinema, that
> threshold at which religious ritual gradually turned
> into art, at which the straightforward cult act gradually
> turned into symbolic ritual, then to metamorphose into
> an artistic image[36].

Following this myth, a crucial «social act» unfolds, in which a population achieves its unity by ripping apart and devouring its leader: «The oneness of his body was transformed into the unity of the tribe. His body unified the tribe»[37]. With the passage of time, this more violent and brutal form has been substituted, «the actions became symbolic and figurative»[38]: the act of cult thus from «being a collective», becomes, for Ejzenštejn, a «performance»[39], a form of representation.

Thanks to this formulation, the Russian director is able to exalt »the actions of dismembering and recomposing to the status of a founding artistic principle»[40]. It is the principle of montage, in which a determinate element, in order to obtain a new meaning, must be extrapolated from its normal collocation and be *digested* in a different configuration that allows it to express its truth content.

For Ejzenštejn, montage embodies the crucial aspect through which «the fundamental principle for the existence of every artwork and every art-form» can be expressed, that is, «the dialectic course (substance) of the external events of the world»[41].

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36 *Ibidem.*
37 *Ibidem.*
38 *Ivi*, p. 170.
39 *Ibidem.*
40 A. Somaini, *Cinema as Dynamic Mummification, History as Montage: Ejzenštejn's Media Archaeology*, in Antonio Somaini and Naum Kleiman (ed.), *Sergei M. Ejzenštejn. Notes on General History of Cinema*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam 2016, pp. 19-109, p. 64.
41 S. Ejzenštejn, *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, Harvest, San Diego, CA 2002, pp. 46-47.

It is the aim of every art to «make manifest» this principle: «the dialectic contradictions of Being»[42]. Through montage, then, Ejzenštejn shows this dialectical tension embedded in every form of art; because art, for the director, should always float between «natural existence and creative tendency», «organic inertia and purposeful initiative»[43].

As Deleuze has reminded us, «Ejzenštejn's essential revolution»[44] lies precisely in this, namely in giving «dialectics a properly cinematic sense»[45]: a substitution of Griffith's convergent montage «with a montage by qualitative leaps», in which «what is designated is no longer the unity of opposites but the passage of one into the other and the creation of a new unity»[46].

However, the Russian director does not only distance himself from his overseas colleagues: his approach to montage theory is rooted in the Russian culture of the time. His thought thus manages to surpass the theories of his master Lev Kuleshov and his concept of editing[47]: if «Kuleshov considered montage to be a storytelling technique»[48], Ejzenštejn went beyond this assumption: cinema could provide more of just a plot, it could «create and 'image' from the juxtaposition of cuts»[49].

In his 1929 text *The Dramaturgy of Film Form*, the Russian director merges Engels's theory of dialectic with his theory of montage: the Kuleshov link between two frames, then, is seen as «a weak version of the more basic process of conflict»[50]. Montage – and, thus, cinema itself – is not to be conceived as a series

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42 *Ibidem*.

43 *Ibidem*.

44 G. Deleuze, *The Movement-Image*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1997, p. 37.

45 *Ibidem*.

46 P. Maratti, *Gilles Deleuze. Cinema and Philosophy*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 2008, p. 50.

47 With his famous experiment, known as the Kuleshov effect, the Russian filmmaker showed how the intrinsic meaning of each shot is always determined by those that precede and follow it.

48 D. Bordwell, *The Cinema of Ejzenštejn*, Routledge, London 2020, p. 123.

49 *Ibidem*.

50 *Ivi*, p. 129.

of single shots placed one after the other like building blocks: defined in this way, the montage would become «the means of unrolling an idea with the help of single shots»[51] – what Ejzenštejn referred to as the «epic principle»[52].

Such criticism resembles Benjamin's attack on the historicist lesson on history: a principle for which, as already explained in the previous section of this article, the idea is not expressed through a juxtaposition of the various elements of history, but through the linearity of the latter and the present into which this linearity flows into.

However, for Ejzenštejn, the principle of montage «arises from the collision of independent shots; shots even opposite to one another: the 'dramatic principle'»[53]. Ejzenštejn's montage therefore does not unite, does not simplify the meaning of each shot solely to the showing of a plot, as Kuleshov would like. Similarly, it does not participate in the unfolding of an idea exclusively through the concatenation of images that acquire meaning exclusively in their conclusion. Ejzenštejn's images reveal their meaning, their intrinsic truth through their collision, the breaking up of the concatenation of meaning.

Benjamin certainly had the opportunity to become acquainted with Ejzenštejn's work during his stay in Moscow in the winter of 1926. Although they never met, the German philosopher was struck by a screening of *Battleship Potemkin,* a vision that helped shape his conception of cinema later expressed in the famous *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility*.

Benjamin and Ejzenštejn were surely distant in certain respects: indeed, in the director we cannot find any trace of Proustian *memoire involontaire* for example – in which truth lies in the death of intention. Furthermore, Benjamin conceived a different conception of the classic Engels dialectic, which was

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51 S. Ejzenštejn, *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, cit., p. 49
52 *Ibidem*. Ejzenštejn attributed this principle to the films of another great Soviet director of the time, Vsevolod Pudovkin (S. Ejzenštejn, *Film Form. Essays in Film Theory*, cit., p. 49).
53 *Ibidem*.

followed instead by Ejzenštejn, in the aspect we have underlined. However, both of them ascribed to montage the ability to «interrupt narrative» in order to generate «a potent structural principle for revolutionary art»[54]. As in Benjamin's dialectical image, a caesura in the flow of the plot in Ejzenštejn's movie serves as «an organizing function»[55]: against Vertov's kine-eye, the director of *October* proposed a kine-fist, a sudden break in the flow of the event, a call for the spectators «to take position»[56].

Certainly, Ejzenštejn was a more orthodox Marxist than Benjamin: but even if the former never conceived of revolution as an arrest of the Marxist-Engelsian dialectic, he nevertheless perceived montage as an instrument to break the positivist linearity of the Stalinist regime's realism, diverging, as will be seen in the next section, both from the formalism of which he had been accused and from pure representationalism.

It is possible to attribute to both of them what Didi-Huberman calls *dialectique du monteur*, in which the artist shows «symptoms, unresolved contradictions, speed of appearance and discontinuity»[57]. Thus, Huberman's dialectic seeks a caesura in the parallel lines of history, a montage work in which the intervals «damage the audience's illusion»[58] and constitute its critical sense. As Somaini has pointed out «both for Ejzenštejn and for Benjamin»[59] the montage becomes «a historiographical tool»[60], a principle able to interrupt «the continuous flow of time»[61]

54 J. Goodwin, *Ejzenštejn, Cinema, and History*, University of Illinois Press, Champaign, IL 1993, p. 77.
55 *Ibidem*.
56 *Ibidem*.
57 G. Didi-Huberman, *Quand Les Images Prennent Position. L'oeil de L'Histoire*, cit., p. 94.
58 *Ibidem*.
59 A. Somaini, *Cinema as Dynamic Mummification, History as Montage: Ejzenštejn's Media Archaeology*, cit., p. 88.
60 *Ibidem*.
61 *Ibidem*.

bringing to light «anachronic junctures»[62]: a process «capable of producing the sudden imagistic constellations»[63].

A Different Realism in October

Following the extraordinary international success of his second film, *Battleship Potemkin*, in the summer of 1926, Ejzenštejn began working on his next project, a work that would focus on the Communist Party's policy on the collectivisation of agriculture[64]. Only a few months after the beginning of the shooting, however, he is commissioned to make a film for the celebration of the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution: on 7 November 1927, a screening of several films made by some of the most important Russian directors of the time celebrated the anniversary of the fall of Tsarism and Ejzenštejn is asked to give his contribution as well.

The making of the film took, however, longer than expected – part of the delay is likely to be attributed to the removal of Trotsky's figure from the final cut at Stalin's behest. Regardless, the movie was only released on March 14th, 1928, with the title *October*. In contrast to the previous film, *October* was subjected to much criticism both in Russia and abroad: «Ejzenštejn, it was said, had not been able to understand the internal basis of the Revolution. No attempt is made to present the Revolution as a link in an historic process»[65]. The main accusations revolve around two main strands: firstly, «not having sufficiently

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62 *Ibidem*.

63 *Ibidem*.

64 The film in question will later be made under the name *The General Line*. Due to some criticism received directly from the government in office, the title will then change to a less official and more generic *Old and New*. For an in-depth analysis of the film, we suggest J. Aumont, *Montage Ejzenštejn*, BFI Publishing, London 1987, pp. 73-144.

65 R. E. Krauss, *Montage October: Dialectic of the Shot*, «October», n. 162, Dec. 2017, p. 134.

respected the objective reality of the facts»[66], and, at the same time, being focused mainly on its experimentalism, «resulting in forcing reality, generating confusion, being aestheticizing»[67].

However, «in showing the events that led up to and culminated in the October Revolution's storming of the Winter Palace, Ejzenštejn had no intention to passively reflect a chain of circumstance»[68]. As a matter of fact, with *October*, Ejzenštejn expresses a realism that precisely departs from the mere representation of events, and it is precisely what this section would like to underline: an overcoming of the traditional form of representationalism to constitute and express a peculiar reality of the image, an image that, «to be such, must always be edited»[69]. Consequently, the cinematographic image must refuse to «mimic reality and passively record it»[70], but neither must it forget that it cannot do without it: an «exact copy and an overall emblem»[71], which «goes beyond mere representation»[72] and is able to «elaborate an image»[73].

In *October* a «profound criticism of documentary or real space»[74] is shown, as Ejzenštejn is able to codify the «same criticism for its polar opposite – the aestheticized space of fiction»[75]. The director does not search for a representation of real proportion of things, because he knows that this would mean a total subordination to an inviolable order of things. As pointed out in the previous section, the Russian director wants to explode a function of a certain form of social structure for

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66 G. Aldo, *Sergej M. Ejzenstejn*, Il Castoro Editrice, Milano 2007, p. 60.

67 *Ibidem*.

68 R. E. Krauss, *Montage October: Dialectic of the Shot*, cit, p. 134.

69 F. Casetti, *L'immagine del Montaggio*, in S. Ejzenštejn, F. Casetti and Pietro Montani (ed.), *Teoria Generale del Montaggio*, Marsilio, Venezia 1992, pp. IX-XXV, p. XIV.

70 G. Aldo, *Sergej M. Ejzenstejn*, cit, p. 67.

71 F. Casetti, *L'immagine del Montaggio*, cit, p. XIV.

72 *Ibidem*.

73 *Ibidem*.

74 R. E. Krauss, *Montage October: Dialectic of the Shot*, cit, p. 137.

75 *Ibidem*.

shaping a new meaning of reality itself. In this sense, *October* might not be a film about a revolution, but it is indeed a revolutionary film, exactly because it aims to restructure the fabric of meaning in reality in same way as a revolutionary action.

Once we have highlighted the value of montage for Ejzenštejn and outlined the parallel with Benjaminian philosophy and conception of the image, in this section we will focus on the film *October*, in order to show how the theories expounded so far are a fundamental basis for understanding not only the film works but above all the relationship between image and realism in Ejzenštejn. From the very first moments of *October*, we can find traces of the myth of Dionysus mentioned above. The film opens with the head of a statue of the Tzar, followed by a series of shots that «construct the whole [monument] through a sequential presentation of its fragments»[76]. A group of people led by a woman[77] appears and starts to tear down the statue: it is the laceration of the Tzar's body, and the digestion of the latter through the image, revealing how his «political power is not given by God but is instead created through the acts of men»[78].

Already from this opening scene, one can observe a certain discrepancy between the fictional and the factual narrative. The statue in question does not depict Nicholas II, the Tzar deposed by the February riots that are supposed to be shown, but his father, Alexander III. The monument, however, not only really existed, but, as Bordwell points out, is shown in fragments of newsreels material grouped in some Esfir Shub's documentary films.

In *October*, thus, Ejzenštejn does not renounce to work also on actual footage and to propose images that resemble a more realistic approach: in the act of framing itself, with its realistic close-ups, or in the semi-documentary bird's-eye shots that show the unfolding of popular uprisings.

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76 *Ivi*, p. 143.
77 David Bordwell dwells on an interesting analysis of the female figure and gender representation in the film. See D. Bordwell, *The Cinema of Ejzenštejn*, cit., pp. 90-91.
78 *Ibidem*.

The most famous depicts the violent suppression of the July uprisings by the Provisional Government established at the dawn of the February events. Ejzenštejn decides to open the episode precisely with a lengthy overview, «documentary in kind»[79], of some workers who, not heeding the calls of the party, launch into a spontaneous uprising towards the centre of St. Petersburg. The situation precipitates once the group of workers reaches the Neva River and the workers must cross it in order to reach the city centre. The editing becomes more and more frenetic. Shots of a machine gun in sharp contrast and in different angles are mingled together with the face of the shooter in an extremely rapid rhythm. A worker is attacked by a group of bourgeois women on the bank of the Neva River. A machine gun shot reaches a horse that was pulling a cart: the animal lies dead on the ground, as does a woman, whose long hair covers her entire head. Suddenly, with a phone call, a member of the government orders the bridge reached by the popular uprising to be raised, excluding the workers from the heart of the city. The bridge opens in two, in a solemn and peremptory monumentality: the woman's hair is moved by the opening mechanism, while the horse hangs for a few moments in the middle of the bridge, dangling over the river's waters.

Spatio-temporal ties are completely reconsidered, breaking away from the more realistic appearance of the first parts. Time dilates and spatial coordinates become tangled: «cutting back and forth between the truss-work underneath the bridge and the head and hair of the dead woman, Ejzenštejn gives us the sickening reality of that exercise of power in an agony of repetition that carries with it the effect of a dream»[80]. The rising bridge is surely «a monument to the workers defeat»[81], but it has no just political resonance: its uncrossability sheds light on the «continuous attempt to free actions from the definition of real

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79 *Ibidem*.
80 D. Bordwell, *The Cinema of Ejzenštejn*, cit., p. 88.
81 *Ibidem*.

time and space»[82]. At the end of the episode, Ejzenštejn shows the Russian newspaper *Pravda* (Truth in Russian) that slowly sinks into the river. Besides the political defeat of the revolt, might this be a sign of the impossibility to reach a perfect truth in the cinematographic image?

Rosalind Krauss, in her relevant article from 1973, has rightly underlined how the dialectical conception that characterised Ejzenštejn's silent cinema[83] is evident in *October* from this «alternation between a documentary and a formal space»[84]. The sequence of the bridge, then, is the specific moment in which the realistic and the formalistic tones used by Ejzenštejn in the previous part of the movie «are finally collapsed… and condemned»[85]: divided by a bridge opening that does not allow for communicability. Perhaps Ejzenštejn's reasons are to be found in the waters of the Neva in which the newspaper sinks, symbol of the revolt's demise. The whole sequence, for Krauss, «carries with it Ejzenštejn's criticism of both those modes of filmic vision, insofar as they stand for the terms of historical perception»[86]. For the Russian director as long as the only option to consider cinema will be trapped in these two polar opposites, «then the mode of our viewing of film [will] resembles the alternatives of an essentially depoliticized mode of viewing history»[87]: a conceptualisation of history that becomes «either the record of events passively reflected in the mind (as in the thesis of the documentary), or else it is the contemplated unfolding of a disembodied ideal (as in the antithesis of the film as "art")»[88].

Therefore, considering what has been emphasised in this article so far, the director moves away from a historiographic

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82 *Ibidem*.
83 It was decided to emphasise this distinction following Bordwell's reading of Ejzenštejn's entire filmography and his epistemological change in the second part of his career (D. Bordwell, *The Cinema of Ejzenštejn*, cit.).
84 R.E. Krauss, *Montage October: Dialectic of the Shot*, cit., p. 139.
85 *Ibidem*.
86 *Ivi*, p. 141.
87 *Ivi*, p. 139.
88 *Ibidem*.

conception that claims to confront the past «the way it really was»[89]: the historicism repudiated by Benjamin in his *Theses*, as condescending to the socio-political order in power. At the same time, Krauss seems to say, Ejzenštejn does not come close to a total idealism, which wants a film completely detached from the profilmic image, seeing it as the unfolding of a metaphysical concept, or, in Hegelian fashion, as the slow revelation of the Idea.

One of the features that caused the most controversy at the time in *October* was undoubtedly Ejzenštejn's lingering over details and objects within the scenes set in the Winter Palace. In fact, the director describes the place of power as a repository of artefacts: glasses and utensils placed in seemingly endless sequences, small and large statues, semi-moving mechanical structures, such as the famous robotic peacock. The sequences shot in the palace featuring Kerensky, head of the provisional government established after the February revolution, are all punctuated by frames of these objects, all captured against a black background in an almost timeless aura. With this type of montage, Ejzenštejn wanted to both portrait the autarchic word of the Palace as a word of endless accumulation and, at the same time, the revolution as the end of a way to conceive the object.

On another perspective, however, the shots of these items are used to interrupt the continuity of the plot: the director breaks up the diegetic space of the events by interposing objects that nevertheless are a part of the narrated setting and, dialectically, place themselves in another space, outside the events. In other words, the objects in the winter palace are not pure abstraction: Ejzenštejn distances himself enormously from the extreme abstractionism of Malevich, the leader of the Suprematist painting movement, who stigmatised cinema as «fallen art» for being too «mortgaged to the world of concrete things»[90]. The Russian director underlines the possibility of cinema to get involved with the real, but not to merely re-present it.

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89 W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings. Vol. 4, 1938-1940*, cit., p. 391.
90 S. Liebman, *Review of Malevich and Film; the White Rectangle: Writings on Film, Kazimir Melevich*, Cinéaste, vol. 29, n. 3, 2004, pp. 60-63.

Aumont rightly suggested a principle governing Ejzenštejn's silent cinema – namely, that «no simple representation of an event is in itself significant»[91]. The interminable series of items showed by the director, thus, finds their meaning not in «the reproduction of a reality that the spectator could freely observe, as in Bazin's democratic utopia of the image»: their meaning, their inner truth «must be constructed through the organization of discrete units of signification»[92].

This implies that in Ejzenštejn there is a third, ever-changing truth in the cinematographic image, one that does not lie neither in the re-proposition of reality nor in the abstract presentation of an idea, but rather in a modification of the former in order to sustain the latter[93]. The role of cinema is not mimetic, just as it cannot be – as Malevich argued – that of pure abstract creation. Cinema, through montage, «separate[s] details out of the body of an objectively real space»[94] in order «to force them into conjunction within the flow of the film in order to produce concepts or significances completely new»[95]. It neither copies reality nor creates something outside of it: it «sever[s] into pieces the uninterrupted wholeness of reality»[96] for adding new meanings from it.

91 J. Aumont, *Montage Ejzenštejn*, cit., p. 90.

92 *Ibidem.*

93 For an elaborate analysis of the concept of truth and meaning in Ejzenštejn's image performed against the backdrop of a critique of Roland Barthes' reading, see G. Didi-Huberman, *Pathos and Praxis (Ejzenštejn versus Barthes*, in N. Kleiman and A. Somaini (edited by), *Sergei M. Ejzenštejn. Notes for a General History of Cinema*, 2016, pp. 309-322. For Didi-Huberman, Ejzenštejn's truth should not be reduced «to an absolute knowledge issuing from the speculative movement» but neither «from the conflict between two opposite parties», for instance «illusion against truth». It must be searched in a type of «dialectics constantly involved the intervention of the mythos in the logos and of the pathos in the praxis». For our argument, here, the truth of the Eisenstenian image has to be conceived as a continuous process of addition to the real through a tension between filmic and profilmic. If for Barthes, Ejzenštejn imposed meaning through the image, here it is argued that the filmmaker broke meaning through montage.

94 R. E. Krauss, *Montage October: Dialectic of the Shot,* cit., p. 135.

95 *Ibidem.*

96 *Ibidem.*