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We Have Always Been Cinematic. Sergei Eisenstein as Art Historian

Studies of film theory have, for the most part, been oriented towards the analysis of film as the sole medium of cinema, although this medium is far from exclusive or distinctive. The analysis of the filmic medium engendered cinematic laws of syntax and creation that made the art form easier to censor and control. It was precisely at the height of Stalinist censorship throughout the 1930s, that Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein developed his anti-mediumistic approach to cinema through “cinématisme/cinematism”. My PhD dissertation analyzes this “cinematism”; or the contention that cinema has been foreshadowed by painting, and that cinematic patterns of thinking have already existed in works of art and literature BEFORE the arrival of film as medium. My work breaks away from the recent studies of Sergei Eisenstein that have insisted evermore on the centrality of montage to his cinematic work while neglecting other aspects of his theories, mainly those relevant to art history.

At the center of my research is a radical Eisensteinian reversal of the consideration usually bestowed upon cinema: Instead of the usual assumption that cinema heralds from a line of immobile images which finally acquired motion, comes the notion that we have always been cinematic, we merely had to wait for the arrival of film as modern medium, and that film strategies employed by painters such as El Greco, which today are no longer exclusive to the medium of film, actually also existed before this very medium. Eisenstein posits that, for example, El Greco did not influence cinema, but he anticipated it, and this anticipation opens the possibility for the consideration of cinema as principle to be employed not only for the comprehension of film, but also as a prism through which other arts, and art history, can be understood. My approach thus sets itself apart from these previous works on Eisenstein by inscribing him in the history of art history as opposed to the history of cinema exclusively.

The first part of my presentation contextualizes the emergence of “cinematism” by understanding the circumstances in which it was developed. My contention for this part is that Eisenstein's experience with the fragility of film, an art form always at the mercy of its own materiality or the whims of censors, lead him to conceive of cinema as a principle

independent of film as its privileged and vulnerable medium. I argue that the anti-mediumistic “cinematism” stems from the director's own body of work during this period which is mainly comprised of dead movies. These films which were unrealized, incomplete or withdrawn from circulation altogether from 1929 to 1937 due to ideological conflicts and censorship, will be analyzed in conjunction with his writings on “cinematism”.

The second part of my presentation is reserved for the precise definition of “cinematism” relying on Eisenstein's impressive analysis of El Greco and the current state of the art. The latter includes but is not to be reduced to Francois Albera and Maria Tortajada's work "Cinema Beyond Film. Media Epistemology in The Modern Era" which foregrounds the anti-mediumistic approach which I will be adopting, as well as the contemporary considerations of “cinematism” as a prism for the understanding of literature, mainly by Jacqueline Nacache and Jean-Loup Bourget in "La littérature au prisme du cinéma" to prove that cinema as a principle, does not need the (fragile) medium that is film.