

Sergei Eisenstein and William Shakespeare. A Dialectical Love Story¹

Abstract: Traditional film theorists, from the 1910s through the 1950s, often focused on the “essential” differences between the arts of theater and film. Shakespeare was frequently a part of those specificity theory discussions, particularly as his work was so often adapted to silent film (generally in shreds and patches) and then in longer form for talkies in the first decade of sound. The cinematic and written work of prominent Russian filmmaker and theorist Sergei Eisenstein (1898-1948) engages dialogically with Shakespeare and/in film in significant ways that stretch far beyond the passing of this early giant of film theory. This article examines how Eisenstein’s formalist and specificity-oriented theory features Shakespeare at its very core while his later films, *Alexander Nevsky* (1938) and *Ivan the Terrible (Part I, 1944; Part II, 1958; Part III, 1946)*, were purposely structured in emulation of Shakespeare’s contrapuntally designed history plays and the battle scenes in the major tragedies, particularly *Macbeth*. Conversely, the impact of Eisenstein’s films and theoretical work can be seen clearly in the major film adaptations of *Henry V* (close or free, in part or whole), from Laurence Olivier’s 1944 wartime adaptation, through Orson Welles’s masterpiece *Chimes at Midnight* (1965), to Thea Sharrock’s *Hollow Crown* adaptation (2013). Thus, as a filmmaker and theorist, Eisenstein finds profound inspiration in Shakespeare, and, in turn, several directors of Shakespeare films are in dialogue with Eisenstein’s work regarding the ideological power and purpose of juxtapositionally structured “chronicle” films, which promulgate cogent ideological messages by demanding active spectatorship. In his later writing, Eisenstein declares that Shakespeare’s plays figuratively and literally “mediate” the very *Urphänomen* of cinema, which stretches back into the prehistoric mists of mythological time and forward into theoretical futures.

Keywords: *film theory, montage, Caroline Spurgeon, history plays, formalism, Henry V, chronicles*

Traditional film theorists, from the 1910s through the 1950s, often focused on the “essential” differences between the arts of theater and film. Shakespeare was frequently a part of those specificity theory discussions, particularly as his work was so often adapted to silent film (generally in shreds and patches) and then in longer form for talkies in the first decade of sound. The cinematic and written work of prominent Russian filmmaker and theorist Sergei Eisenstein (1898-1948) engages dialogically with Shakespeare and/in film in significant ways that stretch far beyond the passing of this early giant of film theory. This article examines how Eisenstein’s formalist and specificity-oriented theory features Shakespeare at its very core. Furthermore, Eisenstein’s later films, *Alexander Nevsky* (1938) and *Ivan the Terrible (Part I, 1944; Part II, 1958; Part III [short], 1946)*, were purposely structured in emulation of Shakespeare’s contrapuntally designed history plays and the battle scenes in the major tragedies, particularly *Macbeth*. Conversely, the impact of Eisenstein’s films and theoretical work can be seen clearly in the major film adaptations of *Henry V* (close or free, in part or whole), from Laurence Olivier’s 1944 wartime adaptation, through Orson Welles’s masterpiece *Chimes at Midnight* (1965), to Thea Sharrock’s *Hollow Crown* adaptation (2013). Thus, as a filmmaker and theorist, Eisenstein finds profound inspiration in Shakespeare, and, in turn, several directors of Shakespeare films are in dialogue with Eisenstein’s work regarding the ideological power and purpose of juxtapositionally structured “chronicle” films, which promulgate cogent ideological messages by demanding active spectatorship.

Strongly influenced by Hegel and Marx both ideologically and artistically, Sergei Eisenstein took a more radical approach to filmmaking than most of his peers: he aestheticized the dialectical movement

¹ This article is dedicated to the irrepressible Christian Smith, my favorite Marxist interlocutor, who left us too soon.

of history through the conflict and collision of contrasting film shots placed beside each other, which, he believed, would force the audience to feel strong emotions and then *think* about the theme or principle expressed by these disjunctions. Indeed, Eisenstein declared that “the basis of every art is conflict (an ‘imagist’ transformation of the dialectical principle)”.² Most important of all to Eisenstein was this embodiment of the dialectical message, the film’s theme or principle, within the dialectical film form: form expresses function (or “content”).³ In other words, the “pieces” both individually and collectively communicate ideology. Furthermore, Eisenstein did not think this could be accomplished without the *active mind* of the spectator filling in the gaps “between” images and co-creating meaning: the viewer must take on “the task of inner collaboration as co-author”, which amounts to “unifying” the montage pieces assembled by the filmmaker.⁴ What is often overlooked in the accounts of Eisenstein’s montage theory is his extension of his principle of audio-visual counterpoint to conflict between *scenes*, thus emphasizing contrapuntal plot structure as a “wide-angle” macro-model of dynamic intra- and inter-shot juxtaposition. In the final decade of the theorist-filmmaker’s too-short life, Eisenstein turns to Shakespeare as the apotheosis and progenitor of purposefully disjunctive narrative form. Eisenstein’s public connection to the playwright began in his late teens, when he started to work in theatre arts during his military service. Between 1917 and the early 1920s, he created production designs for at least seven Shakespeare plays, though not all were staged.⁵ Thus, the Soviet filmmaker’s work in cinema and theory were steeped in his knowledge of and experience collaborating with Shakespeare.

By 1924, Eisenstein was consumed by the art of cinema, directing and co-writing *Strike* (1925) and the legendary *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) in his first year as a filmmaker. Nevertheless, Shakespeare continued to haunt and inspire him: there are mentions of and allusions to Shakespeare scattered throughout the director’s writings, drawings, and films. True to his dialectical approach to art, Eisenstein engaged in more of a dialogue with Shakespeare’s work rather than reverently citing him. To Eisenstein, Shakespeare was a fellow artist whose work revealed and modeled Marxist dialectical struggle in multivalent ways. While the most explicit references to the Bard are found in Eisenstein’s writings of the late 1930s into the 1940s, in the *early* 1930s he composed numerous drawings referencing *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. In the summer of 1931, during rains in Mexico that interrupted the filming of *¡Que Viva México!* (1932), Eisenstein drew over 140 sketches “connected (at some remove)” with the Scottish play on the subject of “The Death of King Duncan”.⁶ These abstract line-drawings were done quickly and bear a sense of the iconic, primitive, and erotic, exploring the connections between violence, evil, and power. Furthermore, Duncan’s “pierced”, beheaded, and otherwise violated body in many of the drawings could be interpreted “as representing the idea that the origins of montage as a ‘method of dismemberment and reunification’ can be found in the reenactment of the dismemberment of the body of Dionysus”.⁷ In 1937, the filmmaker directly connected Shakespeare’s art with the figure of Dionysus in writing that will be investigated shortly. Throughout the 1930s, Eisenstein was thinking in increasingly mythical and symbolic terms about the theory of disparate pieces “sewn” together to create a unified meaning; the apparent “realistic” body of the image needed to be “decomposed” so the spectator can

² Sergei Eisenstein, “The Cinematographic Principle and the Idiogram”, in *Film Form*, ed. and trans. by Jay Leyda (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1949), 38. See also the chapter “A Dialectic Approach to Film Form”, 45-63.

³ See the long chapter “Form and Content: Practice”, in Eisenstein, *Film Sense*, ed. and trans. by Jay Leyda (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1942), 157-216, wherein the director performs masterful close readings of his film *Alexander Nevsky* (1938) that include both image and sound.

⁴ Cit. in N. M. Lary, “Eisenstein and Shakespeare”, in Ian Christie and Richard Taylor, eds., *Eisenstein Rediscovered: Soviet Cinema of the '20s and '30s* (London: Routledge, 2015), 143-144.

⁵ Jay Leyda and Zina Voynow, *Eisenstein at Work* (New York: Museum of Modern Art/Pantheon Books, 1982), 6-10.

⁶ Lary, “Eisenstein”, 142.

⁷ Antonio Somaini, “Cinema as ‘Dynamic Mummification,’ History as Montage: Eisenstein’s Media Archeology”, in Naum Kleiman and Antonio Somaini, eds., *Sergei M. Eisenstein: Notes for a General History of Cinema* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam U.P., 2016), 95.

identify the “skeleton”, the core structural principle (thematic message), which is the essential reality beneath any given story.⁸ The filmmaker’s obsession with the art and ritual surrounding Día de los Muertos clearly left a deep and permanent impression. In 1929, Eisenstein gave a speech to the Congress of Independent Filmmakers at La Sarraz in which he discusses his conception of “mimetic reality” and the key function of symbolic “objects”, declaring, in Taylor’s summation, that “when art imitated reality it had to imitate not the reality of surface appearance (photographic reality) but the reality of inner essence (the essential bone-structure)”, and this vivid expression of “inner essence” is what makes a piece of art, filmic or otherwise, “effective in an artistic (and also a political) sense”.⁹ Art and politics were always inextricable in his stage and film work and in his theory. These overarching concepts regarding the definition and function of a “real” image would set him apart from the mimetic realism theories of the “essence” of film propounded by contemporaries Siegfried Kracauer and André Bazin.

Returning to the “Death of King Duncan” sketches, it appears that the filmmaker was processing his new sensory experiences through abstract thinking about a bloody murder scene that does *not* exist in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*; it is only described. Eisenstein chooses a play that plays with death, as it were, and he confabulates images to fill the gap created by Shakespeare’s “jump cut” from before to after Duncan’s slaying by Macbeth (between 2.1 and 2.2). This is precisely what the director demands from his *cinema* spectators. As Dudley Andrew poetically expounds, Eisenstein believed that a filmmaker must lead the spectator to the crux of a film’s theme or ideological principle:

with his eyes open, exposing the spectator to his means, his mechanism, not merely because this style is preferable to the illusionary realism which is the hallmark of Hollywood but because *the film derives its energy from the conscious mental leaps of the spectator*. The audience literally brings to life the dead stimuli, forcing lightning to leap from pole to pole until a whole story is aglow and until the theme is illuminated.¹⁰ (my emphasis)

Dialectical montage requires spectators to collaborate actively in the production of meaning, and Eisenstein focuses on inspiring this process by evoking intense emotion. It insists on the “active spectator”. Furthermore, Eisenstein clearly sees a similar dialecticism in Shakespeare. In sketching more than 140 “leaps” – his manifold visions of Duncan’s murder – the director is co-authoring, dialoguing, with Shakespeare, actively investigating not just the meaning of this play but the significance of his own understandings of power structures and the consequences of political violence on and for the individual and society. It is, perhaps, not surprising that the Shakespearean filmmaker most compared to Eisenstein in regard to style and structure is Orson Welles, and it is he, another theater veteran and polymath, who was courageous enough to retain Shakespeare’s repression of Duncan’s bloody murder in his *Macbeth* (1948) on screen, inviting spectators cognitively to fill in the gaps, to join Macbeth and his wife in imagining the gruesome scene.¹¹

As noted, it is in Eisenstein’s later films – the historical epics *Alexander Nevsky* and *Ivan the Terrible* – and later writings – that one finds his most substantial dialogue with Shakespeare, particularly with the history plays and *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, and *King Lear*, all plays about kingship, politics, and abuses of power with roots in chronicles more or (much) less historically based. As a Marxist, Eisenstein was ever focused on the movement of social and political history. In his fine piece “Eisenstein and Shakespeare”, N. M. Lary posits that Eisenstein believed “tragedy”, especially “Greek and Elizabethan”, embodies “the dialectical nature of the world”: “In a world of change, the most powerful art dealt with the experience

⁸ See Mikhail Yampolsky, “The Essential Bone Structure: Mimesis in Eisenstein”, trans. by Richard Taylor, in Christie and Taylor, eds., *Eisenstein Rediscovered*, 171-82.

⁹ Richard Taylor, “Introduction: Eisenstein at La Sarraz”, in Christie and Taylor, eds., *Eisenstein Rediscovered*, 63-65, 64.

¹⁰ J. Dudley Andrew, *The Major Film Theories: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1976), 63.

¹¹ Akira Kurosawa also resisted the temptation to stage the Duncan analog’s murder in his peerless Japanese *Macbeth* adaptation, *Throne of Blood* (1957).

of change. The most ‘pathetic’ art was an expression of a world of dialectical transformation”.¹² Furthermore, he “stressed that Shakespeare was living in an age of major political and social change”, like himself.¹³ Eisenstein saw tragedy as an art of suffering that evokes strong emotions and thereby cathartic relief. In Shakespeare’s history plays, tragedy is always looming over individuals and society at large. Eisenstein mined these plays for plot pieces, imagery, and structure, particularly when developing his final masterpieces, *Alexander Nevsky* and *Ivan the Terrible*.

From early in his career, Eisenstein was interested in expressing abstract themes through graphic symbols and rituals (official and personal), a practice, he observed, that Shakespeare knew well and used frequently in the plays, especially in those dealing with politics and power struggles. This approach to imagery became increasingly distilled throughout his career; for instance, *Parts I and II* of *Ivan* open with a lingering close-up of the Tsar’s crown, the ultimate symbol of power and of the unification of a nation, and the diadem functions as a redolent sign throughout. In his 1955 adaptation of *Richard III*, Laurence Olivier, its director and star, also opens with a close-up of the royal crown then depicts the coronation of Edward IV of the ill-fated house of York. It is possible that Olivier had seen *Part I* of Eisenstein’s epic, but the imagery in Shakespeare’s history plays is more likely to have been Olivier’s guide, as it was Eisenstein’s. In fact, in the 1930s, Eisenstein pored through Caroline Spurgeon’s classic of Shakespeare criticism, *Shakespeare’s Imagery and What It Tells Us* (1923), “filling his copy with underlinings”, as he was drawn to Spurgeon’s treatment of “Shakespeare’s total metaphoric vision”.¹⁴ Indeed, Spurgeon’s ideas about the purpose of imagery in literature sounds a good deal like Eisenstein’s regarding film. She describes an image as “a little word-picture” used by a writer “to illustrate, illuminate and embellish his *thought*. It is a description or an *idea*, which by comparison or analogy ... with something else, transmits to us through the *emotions* and *associations* it arouses, something of the ‘wholeness’, the depth and richness of the way the writer views, conceives or has felt what he is telling us” (my emphasis).¹⁵ Imagery and its orchestration, as with Eisenstein’s *montage*, are a means of *speaking*.¹⁶

Spurgeon, like the filmmaker, also rejects verisimilar realism, explaining that an “image ... gives quality, creates atmosphere and conveys emotion in a way no precise description [i.e. realism], however clear and accurate, can possibly do” (9). Furthermore, Eisenstein’s notion of a film’s “essential bone-structure”, the message behind the material, is often depicted with or through richly complex iconic imagery in his films. He believed and put into practice Spurgeon’s declaration that “it is only by means of these hidden analogies that the greatest truths, otherwise inexpressible, can be given a form or shape capable of being grasped by the human mind” (7). Eisenstein himself cited Spurgeon’s assertion that Shakespeare had “a peculiar habit of seeing emotional or mental situations throughout a play in repeatedly recurring physical pictures”, connecting Shakespeare’s artistic vision to his own and to what he believed to be the ideal creative process.¹⁷

In the volume *Towards a Theory of Montage* (hereafter *Montage*), comprised of essays written between 1937 and 1940, Eisenstein discusses Caroline Spurgeon’s work in some detail in his lengthy, wide-ranging essay “Laocoön”.¹⁸ Most of these essays were published in English translation for the first

¹² Lary, “Eisenstein”, 144.

¹³ Lary, “Eisenstein”, 146.

¹⁴ Lary, “Eisenstein”, 148.

¹⁵ Caroline Spurgeon, *Shakespeare’s Imagery and What It Tells Us* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1923), 9.

¹⁶ Eisenstein, “Dickens, Griffith and the Film Today”, in *Film Form*, 245.

¹⁷ See Spurgeon, *Shakespeare’s Imagery*, 257, and Eisenstein, *Towards a Theory of Montage: Sergei Eisenstein Selected Works*, Vol. 2 [1992], ed. by Michael Glenny and Richard Taylor, trans. by Michael Glenny (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 188.

¹⁸ Eisenstein, “Laocoön”, in *Montage*, 102-202; see esp. 187-193. In the title of this essay, Eisenstein refers directly to the influential 1766 treatise *Laocoön; or, on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, by German philosopher and dramatist Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, wherein Lessing develops a “specificity theory” that delineates the differences between the essence and functions of painting versus those of poetry. Film theorists of the first half of the twentieth century used this model to explore

time in 1992 by the British Film Institute as the second volume of their extensive four-volume series *S. M. Eisenstein: Selected Works*. In *Montage*, Eisenstein uses Spurgeon's ideas about Shakespeare's imagery, particularly that related to the human body, to argue that Shakespeare is "an absolute master" at both using juxtapositional montage in the imagery and formal structure of his plays and at "montage reworking", or "'re-montage'", incorporating materials from his primary sources, including from his own works, to create new art.¹⁹ To Eisenstein, this was not a matter of what Frederic Jameson would later dismissively call postmodern pastiche, empty allusion or copying for the sole purpose of play(ing). Instead, this re-employment of (re)sources, such as Holinshed's *Chronicles* or Senecan revenge tragedy, was a redeployment of ideas and materials to address issues of the *present*: "Here it should be noted that 're-montage' is profoundly ideological, tendentious and meant to ensure that in its 're-scripted' and 're-montaged' form the material, which in itself had no connection with Shakespeare's ideals, would be made to serve [Shakespeare's] ideas".²⁰ In this passage, the Soviet director also is pulling heavily from the work of his contemporary and friend Ivan Aksenov (1884-1935), a Russian theater critic and historian specializing in Elizabethan drama who worked with the young Eisenstein in Vsevolod Meyerhold's theater company in the first half of the 1920s.²¹ In the early 1930s, Eisenstein invited Aksenov to teach at the State University of Cinematography, so it is clear they not only were friends but shared an interest in theater, Shakespeare, and cinema. The director's lengthy quotations of and many references to Aksenov in *Montage*, published two years after Aksenov's death, prove that Eisenstein's thinking about Shakespeare was greatly impacted by Aksenov, who wrote about fifteen works on Shakespeare, most of which were written between 1930 and 1935 and published posthumously in 1937 in a book simply titled *Shakespeare*. Eisenstein was drawn to Aksenov's insistence on putting Shakespeare in historical context, which led the Elizabethan historian "to position Shakespeare in the context of class struggle and historical dialectics, in which the playwright emerged as the forefather of (socialist) realism".²² Furthermore, Aksenov asserted, Shakespeare "challenged the obsolete feudal culture and revolutionized theatre by switching focus from the particular to the general, from the ossified misconceptions of the old epoch to the universal truths of human existence" (36). This pro-Soviet, socialist realist reading of Shakespeare was ingrained in Russia by the mid-1930s, and "[b]y 1939 mass Shakespearization was in full swing".²³ Eisenstein, the Formalist who defined "mimesis" as the representation of a generalized "principle" or theme rather than verisimilar imagery, did not embrace socialist realism, but rather redefined the "real", such that the "realism" he praises in Shakespeare is that of primordial truths or phenomena, the "skeleton" onto which he molds his dialectical characters, plot structures, and imagery.

Indeed, despite considering Shakespeare an artistic fellow traveler, a creative *colleague*, Eisenstein also clearly exalts the Bard as the apotheosis of "montage thinking". In *Montage*, he "crown[s]" his examples of montage principles with a study of Shakespeare, who provides "the most vivid and striking manifestation of our subject matter" in all of art history.²⁴ The director uses the work of Aksenov and Spurgeon to build his Shakespearean case, but the foundation of his argument lies in "the myth and mysteries of Dionysus ... being torn to pieces and the pieces being reconstituted in the transfigured

film's ontological, specific essence, alleging that various properties both aesthetic (form) and thematic (function) are innate to cinema.

¹⁹ Eisenstein, *Montage*, 186.

²⁰ Eisenstein, *Montage*, 186.

²¹ See Aleksei Semenenko, "Ivan Aksenov and Soviet Shakespeare", in Tom Bishop et al., eds., *Shakespeare International Yearbook 18: Special Section, Soviet Shakespeare* (London: Routledge, 2020), 21-42. Aksenov was also Eisenstein's first biographer, writing *Sergei Eisenstein: The Portrait of the Artist*, which was not published until 1968.

²² Semenenko, "Ivan Aksenov", 37.

²³ Arkady Ostrovsky, "Shakespeare as a Founding Father of Socialist Realism: The Soviet Affair with Shakespeare", in Irena R. Makaryk and Joseph G. Price, eds., *Shakespeare in the World of Communism and Socialism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 56-83, 58.

²⁴ Eisenstein, *Montage*, 186.

Dionysus”.²⁵ This, he declares, is the prehistoric basis and referent of all art: “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*” (168). Forty-five years before cultural anthropologist Victor Turner published his important study *From Ritual to Theatre* (1982), Eisenstein builds his entire aesthetic theory on the relationship between religious ritual and the arts, predictably focusing on theater and film. He believes that the myths of Dionysus and Osiris provide a model for the form/structure and the core content of artistic works: art is always composed as a “reconstitution” of pieces from the past, and, ultimately, it always refers to the process of growth, decay, and death to which all bodies, human and otherwise, are subject. It is on these grounds that he turns to Spurgeon, whose work substantiates his argument vis-à-vis Shakespeare. Essentially, Eisenstein derives from Spurgeon the idea that “Shakespeare proves to be the first among his contemporaries not only in the quantity but also in the quality of those images of the human body and its parts with which his works are filled”.²⁶ The filmmaker refers to several plays that prominently use body imagery but returns repeatedly to Shakespeare’s mature tragedies, mainly *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* (including the 140 Duncan drawings), and *Coriolanus*. It is unsurprising that the socialist director was drawn to the allegorical treatment of bodies and the Body Politic in these plays, and he notes that *Coriolanus* also is an example of Shakespeare taking a piece of Plutarch’s *Lives* and suturing it into a Jacobean tragedy; thus, it is an example of both montage and “montage thinking” (191).

Furthermore, Eisenstein insists that “in the composition of a whole major class of his plays – *the history plays* – we find ... ‘the body in action’, i.e. in plays whose composition consists in a *movement* through the biography [of their central characters], [but] this image of the ‘*body as process*’ is just as frequent” (my emphasis).²⁷ Eisenstein declares Shakespeare a true *monteur* (editor) because of his “dialectical” orchestration of images:

In [Shakespeare’s] imagery there is a transition from *the assembly and disposition of random extremities* to a different model: the assembly and disposition of the same extremities but in conditions of *sequentially changing* positions in the context not of a body that is torn apart *in itself* but of a body that is breaking up the static configuration of its parts as it moves from phase to phase of a movement. The transfer of this to a sequence of visual images is not merely one of the methods of filmmaking: it is the fundamental phenomenon of cinema itself!²⁸

Shakespeare’s work, therefore, has achieved the most sophisticated levels of montage, which finds its ultimate expression in film. Although it has become a bit of a canard to say that if Shakespeare were alive today, he would have been a filmmaker, it does seem that Eisenstein is claiming Shakespeare as his cinematic montage mentor. The filmmaker’s words above support his contention that the “creative richness” in “Shakespeare’s imagery goes even deeper than the ‘Dionysian’ model, deeper than that prototype of ‘form as structure’ ... Shakespeare actually merges with what was the prototype in nature of the Dionysus-figure”, in other words, the movement and processes of “natural life as a whole”.²⁹

Eisenstein’s final pronouncement on the Shakespearean subject in *Towards a Theory of Montage* sums up his audacious claim that the “Sweet Swan of Avon” is the artist nonpareil of the cinematic *Urphänomen*, Goethe’s notion of the “original” or “primordial phenomenon” that synthesizes empirical

²⁵ Eisenstein, *Montage*, 168.

²⁶ Eisenstein, *Montage*, 188. See also Spurgeon, *Shakespeare’s Imagery*, 50.

²⁷ Eisenstein, *Montage*, 188.

²⁸ Eisenstein, *Montage*, 189.

²⁹ Eisenstein, *Montage*, 190.

experience with theoretical idea or “mental construct”.³⁰ Fundamentally, the filmmaker’s idea of the *Urphänomen* points to his insistence on the form or structure of artistic imagery powerfully expressing its thematic “principle.” Eisenstein declares that Shakespeare’s plays figuratively and literally “mediate” the *Urphänomen* of cinema, which stretches back into the prehistoric mists of time and forward into the theoretical futures of increasingly multifarious artistic images, through cinema and beyond:

Thus we have revealed in Shakespeare each and every variant of the ‘montage approach’ and ‘montage thinking,’ from the most atavistic examples (the ‘Osiris principle’ in his imagery) to the most sophisticated aspects of compositional montage, e.g. in the battle scenes in *Macbeth* and *Richard III*.

It only remains to say one last thing: if Shakespeare has such mastery of all the forms that derive from the *Urphänomen* of cinema, i.e. of all those specific compositional devices ... then is he not equally inclined towards the very *Urphänomen* itself?

What can that cinematic *Urphänomen* be ... outside of cinema? For an author who is not a film-maker, what can its attractions be when he is working within his own, non-cinematic art form?

The main attraction will, of course, be the essential content of the phenomenon: *movement*. And more precisely ... the *image of movement* ... [W]e could say that perception of the phenomenon of any movement consists in the continual break-up of a certain static form and the *re-ordering* of the fragments of *that* static form into a *new* form.³¹

With his concept of the *Urphänomen*, then, Eisenstein uses Shakespeare’s work as the ultimate exemplum of the dialectical law of “movement” that governs nature and history (and *should* govern the form and theme/principle of all art). Conversely, he exalts Shakespeare’s art on the pedestal of the primordial *Urphänomen*, employing the theory to reify and validate the Bard’s status as the premier master of “compositional” montage that communicates the foundational principles of life and history in both structure and meaning. As with Allardyce Nicoll and other early film theorists, it is *movement* that is the essential quality of film, but Eisenstein expands this idea immensely to encompass his entire dialectical philosophy, such that the world, through his lens, is most accurately and powerfully depicted on film. Furthermore, it is Shakespeare who teaches him the most sophisticated “forms” of essential dialectics.

In the consequential passage above, Eisenstein specifically mentions the montage structure in the battle scenes of *Macbeth* and *Richard III*, and, at this point, the filmmaker had already used these scenes as models for his own battle scenes in *Alexander Nevsky* (1938) and would shortly do so in *Ivan the Terrible, Part I* (1944). In war scenes in both films, the director cuts between extreme long shots featuring bold geometric patterns formed by lines of soldiers and armaments moving through the frame, often dominated by negative space; full and medium shots briefly focusing on interactions between the sovereign and individual officers, on heated clashes between opposing soldiers, or on the glory of the leader, which frequently are at waist height or from a low angle, putting viewers in the midst of the violence; and close-ups revealing the attitudes and emotions of soldiers from a variety of ranks. A virtuoso example of this contrapuntal orchestration is the epic “Battle on the Ice” scene in *Alexander Nevsky*, which stretches to nearly a half hour, depicting the unlikely victory of the outnumbered Russian troops in this historic medieval battle in 1242. There are a great many echoes of Shakespeare’s second tetralogy of history plays in this film, including intense battle scenes punctuated by moments of humor, as in Shakespeare’s depiction of the Battle of Shrewsbury at the end of *Henry IV, Part I*, and, as in *Henry V*, the king’s pivotal interactions with his leaders and the rank and file the night before battle, which are juxtaposed with the haughtiness of the enemy, the Germans (or Teutronics) in this case rather than the French at the medieval Battle of Agincourt (1415).

³⁰ Sebastian Meixner, “Urphänomen (Original/Primordial Phenomenon)”, *Goethe-Lexicon of Philosophical Concepts*, 3 (December 2022), <https://doi.org/10.5195/glpc.2022.46>.

³¹ Eisenstein, *Montage*, 192.

Eisenstein's collage of diverse shots in these battle scenes is typical of the conflict-focused editing throughout his oeuvre, although the graphic geometric patterns become prevalent largely in these later works. In *Ivan, Part I*'s battle against the Mongols in Kazan – which, as with Henry V's war against France, the monarch uses to unify his fractious subjects – there are several steep, low-angle full shots of the Tsar, often standing on a hill looking regal with his throne beside him. These images are essentially positive emblems of power; however, there is inherent dissonance in these shots because viewers already know that Ivan is and will continue to be a brutal dictator, far from the anointed “ideal” king. Interspersed close-ups of his underlings show their awe at the majestic, inspirational sight, but the irony is not lost on the audience. The ambivalence in Eisenstein's depiction of a Machiavellian Ivan resonates with Shakespeare's equivocal portrayal of the charismatic Hal/Henry V and with the bloodthirsty Macbeth. This reflects the director's growing disillusionment with the Soviet government, resulting in a shift in his understanding of Ivan to “a more deeply tragic conception of the story – one that sees the limitations of the Marxist explanation of history (and of tragedy)”.³² Lary cites an unposted 1944 letter to writer Yury Tynyanov in which Eisenstein dolefully notes “the tragic inevitability of autocracy and aloneness” (144). As *Ivan the Terrible, Part I* culminates, the ruler of sixteenth-century Russia is faced with war on multiple fronts, and Eisenstein gives us a scene showing the tyrannical leader on his throne receiving messenger after messenger conveying bad news from the battlefields. The director's indebtedness to Shakespeare is evident, and this scene points to Ivan's bloody ruthlessness by alluding to the characters of Macbeth and Richard III. Furthermore, as in Act 5 of *Macbeth*, wherein a succession of messengers comes to deliver the king news of the strength and triumphs of his enemies' army, *Ivan the Terrible* is focused on the process of the dictator's emotional journey rather than the spectacle of the battlefield. As Eisenstein proclaims, Shakespeare excels at “not just the *depiction* of movement but also in the *image* of movement – above all of inner *psychological* movement in his plots and themes ... his command of the *image of movement* is ... indeed boundless”.³³ In this late scene in *Ivan, Part I*, the movement is primarily happening within the protagonist, as messengers move into and out of the frame, reminding the viewer that the film is a *chronicle*, a biographical picture, of the evolution and devolution of one man, a ruler whose great power affects his whole realm: if the head is tempestuous, plagued by megalomania and vengeance, the members of the kingdom are also in chaos. In the midst of World War II and the Soviet Union's grueling fight against Fascistic Axis powers, it is not surprising that Eisenstein decided to make a film about the evils of autocracy; however, he is also pointing at a despot closer to home, Stalin, who would himself decipher this allusion only after screening *Part II*.

As with Shakespeare's battles, designed for the Globe's “little O,” as *Henry V*'s Chorus declares (Prol., l. 14),³⁴ Eisenstein leaves much of the combat in his plots to the spectators' imaginations. Although the filmmaker could have chosen to show the final battles in *Ivan, Part I*, as he does in the earlier grand battle scene, Eisenstein chooses instead to require his viewers to fill in the gaps of the terrors of bloody warfare. This elision of gory and glorious violence at key moments is one of the Shakespearean montage techniques the filmmaker praises and appropriates in his films and his theory. This also brings us back to Eisenstein's insistence on the active spectator. Directly following the filmmaker's passage on Shakespeare's ineluctable connection to the cinematic *Urphänomen*, he returns to his theory of the purpose of montage, its evocation of critical ideological thinking: “Perception is intermittent, but here it is the role of the obturator or interrupter [i.e. the editor] to remove from our perception the *non-significant* elements of the progression of a movement from phase to phase ... The undefined imageless stages between two reasonable combinations are not ‘read’ and only exist ... in the mind of the perceiver!”³⁵ Clearly, it is not only film that contains this kind of “editing”: Shakespeare's

³² Lary, “Eisenstein”, 144.

³³ Eisenstein, *Montage*, 193.

³⁴ All Shakespeare quotations taken from William Shakespeare, *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).

³⁵ Eisenstein, *Montage*, 192.

plays are always already employing montage via the parts of the narrative (*fabula*) they leave out of the performed plot (*syuzhet*), such as Duncan's murder or Ophelia's drowning, and in his elisions and alterations of his source materials, such as Macbeth's seventeen-year reign or Hotspur's age. Eisenstein is talking about cutting here: what the editor/author cuts out of the story in order to evoke emotion, imagination, and intellectual thought, arriving at the all-important "principle" under the "skin" of the artwork.

This lands us squarely in the aesthetic pronouncements of Shakespeare's Chorus in *Henry V*, the final history play of his second tetralogy of "chronicle plays", written shortly before *Hamlet* (circa 1599). In this play's prologue, the Chorus self-consciously mediates the history of the play and directly commands viewers to collaborate: "On your imaginary forces work. / ... / For 'tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings" (*Henry V*, Prologue, ll. 18, 28). Spurgeon's description of the imagery in the five Chorus prologues in *Henry V* reflects Eisenstein's notion that spectators must be co-creators: "the urgent appeal to the onlookers to use their imaginations and piece out with their thoughts the imperfections of actors and stage, is the main theme" of these prologues.³⁶ Eisenstein perceived depicting chronicles – narratives of historical movement – as the highest calling of cinema, and he considered Shakespeare's histories and tragedies to be the nonpareil of evocative contrapuntal structure that inspires spectators to contemplate the systems of power in which and by which they live. Throughout his career as a filmmaker and theorist, Eisenstein connected juxtapositional editing, based on the conflict between one shot and the next, to his overarching idea that the most powerful films, those that move people emotionally and ideologically, possess a unity or harmony between the messaging of the film and its visual and aural form, though the form itself should be disjunctive. Both the cinematic language in a film and the story it tells, therefore, should be structured dialectically in such a way that the viewer must actively participate in creating meaning by filling in the "gaps" between shots and between scenes, but also between images and ideas. Eisenstein's point is well taken: formalist techniques in film can challenge viewers to see or imagine their world differently. Eisenstein's obsession with the "chronicle film" and with Shakespeare's histories make film adaptations of these plays perfect specimens in which to examine the Soviet filmmaker's ideas at work (and in play). For instance, Laurence Olivier's wartime *Henry V* (1944) and Orson Welles's *Falstaff: Chimes at Midnight* (1965) – two earlier examples of Shakespeare's histories on screen being employed overtly as ideological messengers at key political moments – both display an oscillation between realism and formalism that is derived from Eisenstein's films and his theory embedded therein. It is undeniable that Shakespeare's work captivated Sergei Eisenstein and served as the preeminent model inspiring his theoretical concepts from the very beginning of his career to the end of his life, as his words in *Towards a Theory of Montage* attest. Furthermore, whereas the artist-theorist was disappointed with the outcome of Marxism in the form of oppressive Stalinism, Eisenstein never fell out of love with the dialectical Bard.

³⁶ Spurgeon, *Shakespeare's Imagery*, 243. There are many other compelling connections between Spurgeon's *Shakespeare's Imagery* and her Soviet filmmaker-admirer's theoretical perspectives on cinema, literature, and art more broadly, but this is beyond our scope. It also must be noted that Eisenstein was a devoted student of Fyodor Dostoevsky and Charles Dickens as well as Shakespeare, applying artistic insights he derived from their literary work to cinema, as can be seen in his now canonical essay (especially among adaptation theorists), "Dickens, Griffith, and the Film Today", which appears in *Film Form* (195-255).