The Overlap Between Eisenstein and Arnheim:

A New Synthesis in Cinema's Theoretical Non-Realism

Mary Goodwin

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The ideas of Sergei Eisenstein and Rudolf Arnheim have influenced film theory since their critical writings on silent cinema, but their concepts merit a renewed analysis in order to deconstruct and reexamine the contrasts and overlap between the two, and to explain how this analysis can be built into a newly compromised theory of film as art and carrier of meaning. Through an analysis of the contrasts between Eisenstein's and Arnheim's theories on the essence of cinema as art, this essay will argue that the differences in their film theories, and the logical gaps in their arguments, expose the ideological motivations for their concepts of film meaning, and limit the scope of their theories' effective application as isolated ideas. In collaboration with this examination, however, this analysis will argue for an overlap between Eisenstein and Arnheim in their emphasis on film meaning as created through a distance from realism within compositional perception, synthesizing this overlap into a renewed theoretical perspective that accounts for film's artistic meaning through both montage and perceptive depth and as a compositional vehicle for political and narrative discourse.

This analysis of the conflicts, flaws, and synthesized compromise between the ideas of Eisenstein and Arnheim must begin with an examination of the core principles that make up their theories, and the major points of difference that characterize their supposed opposition. In his 1929 essays "Beyond the Shot" and "The Dramaturgy of Film Form," Eisenstein looks to forms of Japanese art, and to examples of his own films, to develop his idea of montage as the essential cinematic element built from the conflict of cinematographically fragmentary imagery and oppositional concepts juxtaposed through editing. Rather than grappling with whether cinema should qualify as art, Eisenstein takes cinema's artistic nature as a given in his ideas, primarily because he claims that "conflict lies at the basis of every art" (Eisenstein 19). Through a Socratic method of logical reasoning which acts on his idea of montage as the principle that executes artistic evolution through "the interaction between two contradictory opposites," Eisenstein then

characterizes montage as a cinematographic collision between shots that act as "neighboring fragments" in film, thereby concluding that montage as inherent conflict not only qualifies film as a distinct art form, but acts as the core catalyst of artistic meaning in cinema itself (Eisenstein 23, 18).

Arnheim's contrasting ideas about film as an artform are elaborated in his 1932 article "Film and Reality," in which he works to prove film's status as art by refuting the "charge that photography and film are only mechanical reproductions," then logically characterizing film's artistic merit as the difference of film's cinematographic characteristics from the perception of those "corresponding characteristic[s] of what we perceive 'in reality" (Arnheim 207). Similarly to Eisenstein, Arnheim compares film to other artforms - not to Japanese drawing techniques or stage acting, but broadly to painting, music, literature, and dance, in that film, like these mediums, "may, but need not, be used to produce artistic results" (Arnheim 207). Rather than identifying film's primary artistic tool as the conflict and synthesis of montage, Arnheim argues that film's artistic meaning lies more so in the camera's position relative to the subject and the lack of depth that sets the filmic product apart from realistic perception. Arnheim elaborates on his claim with the example of a cube set in front of a camera, which will give a different spatial impression depending on its position; the organic effort that creates the meaning in the filmic image, then, is supported by his idea that "the reproduction of even a perfectly simple object is not a mechanical process but can be set about well or badly" (Arnheim 208). The other facet of Arnheim's filmic art as distanced from realistic perception – the reduction of three-dimensional depth – is elucidated in his example of Ruttman's film *Berlin*, in which the flatness of the cinematographic image due to a reduced stereoscopic depth causes a scene of two passing subway trains to occupy a transient space between the spectator's knowledge of movement (as a three-dimensional image), and the movement of the forms between flat edges of the image (as a

shallow plane), thereby removing film from the natural perception and amplifying its artistic ability in Arnheim's point of view (Arnheim 208-209).

In addition to the major difference of Eisenstein and Arnheim's arguments for film's artistic meaning stemming respectively from montage editing and shallow depth framing, the theorist's ideas can be used to delineate further key contrasts to their approaches. These contrasts clarify the theorists' surface opposition and will go hand-in-hand with a deconstruction of their arguments' limitations, in order to argue for a synthesis between the two. In contrast to Eisenstein's established emphasis on conflict between graphic directions, shot levels, and spaces to create meaning, Arnheim stresses a type of harmony within the visual frame (Eisenstein 19). In arguing that film's effective composition comes about through framing and a lack of depth, Arnheim explains that every "good film shot" is one that is a satisfying linear composition, in which "lines are harmoniously disposed with reference to one another," and the audience's attention is therefore – due to the flattened plane of the projected image and its frame – "drawn to the two-dimensional pattern of lines and shadow masses" which abstract film from reality (Arnheim 212). Although this theoretical difference seems to pit Eisenstein and Arnheim irreparably against each other, as the accompanying contrasts also do, differences like this highlight the narrowness of the theorists' foci, supporting the idea that equating filmic artistic merit solely with a compositional harmony or contrast limits the applicability of each argument, and the examples that each theorist cites in display of their ideas prove to be the exceptions of each other's exclusivity and to point toward a synthesis of both viewpoints, both conflict and harmony, as a more effective vehicle for artistic discourse.

Additionally, Eisenstein and Arnheim contrast in the ideal 'types' of cinema that they pursue through their respective theories. Eisenstein uses the idea of film-as-montage to advocate

for an intellectual cinema, "a cinema that seeks the maximum laconicism in the visual exposition of abstract concepts" (Eisenstein 13). Rather than discussing his use of montage in terms of solely building an emotional narrative, Eisenstein uses compositional conflict as a tool for intellectual, political metaphors that point towards very specific conclusions about the filmic subject. For example, montage conflict in the film *October: Ten Days That Shook the World* (Eisenstein 1928) illustrates General Kornilov's attempted coup by juxtaposing "a Baroque Christ with beams streaming (exploding) from its halo" with an "egg-shaped Uzume mask," in order to – according to Eisenstein – produce the effect "of a simultaneous explosion" (Eisenstein 35). Although the visual conflict itself and its dramatic implications very well may create a profound emotional effect within the audience, Eisenstein solely focuses on the singularly specific intellectual/political conclusion that he intends to set forth through this non-realist filmic technique.

In contrast, Arnheim uses his compositional concepts of framing and lack of depth to proclaim and uphold a more narrative and artistic form of cinema than purely an intellectual one. Instead of cinema's fragmentary nonrealism building a political message, Arnheim's focus sees these characteristics of silent film forming the "power to achieve excellent artistic effects" (Arnheim 214). He cites, for example, a scene from *The Immigrant* (Chaplin 1917), in which Chaplin's character appears at first to be seasick over the side of a boat from the first perspective, but then is revealed by the camera to have been fishing. Arnheim uses this scene to illustrate the role of framing as a perceptive tool distanced from real life by the choices of camera position, as a vehicle for the artistic and narrative effect of surprise "achieved by making use of the fact that the spectator will be looking at the situation from a certain definite position," and as controlled by the shallow frame that the camera allows the audience to perceive at any given time (Arnheim 212).

These apparent oppositions between Eisenstein's and Arnheim's purposes for their diametric ideas of film artistic meaning, while seemingly irreconcilable, actually reveal limitations in their theories that are rooted in the narrowness of their niche emphases, and help to uncover and argue for the overlapping ideas between the two that support the formation of a compromised, more widely-applicable theory of filmic meaning in abstracted yet grounded non-realism. These illuminating fallacies can first be tackled in Eisenstein's and Arnheim's respective intellectual/political and narrative/artistic niches. Although Arnheim crafts an effective argument for the role of non-realistic framing as a vehicle for artistic effect and clever narrative surprise in his example from *The Immigrant*, he seems to gloss completely over the sociopolitical commentary widely known to be conveyed in Chaplin's films, made more effective by the artistic delivery. Similarly, the visual conflict in the montage of Eisenstein's films acts as an admittedly powerful tool for associatively proclaiming political messages, but he neglects to address the potential for an audience's variable emotional conclusions from the barrage of conflicting images. A moment he cites in *Battleship Potemkin* (Eisenstein 1926), for example, in which shots are cut together of a "woman with pince-nez" and immediately of the woman with "shattered pince-nez and bleeding eye," obviously contributes via montage to the overarching political statement of the film, but Eisenstein's intellectual focus fails to explore the emotional reaction stirred in the audience at the film's violent scenes, augmented by the abruptness of the montage, which contributes to a narrative engagement with an inevitable pathos of the film that itself augments the ideal rallying behind the intended political effect (Eisenstein 34).

Therefore, Eisenstein and Arnheim get trapped in a residual dedication toward a niche, either for purely political/intellectual effect or narrative/artistic effect, but their theories overlap in that they both are using the concept of film's cinematographic distance from realistic

perception, an abstraction from compositional realism in either conflicting juxtaposition or shallow depth with intentional framing, in order to serve as a vehicle for higher meaning in cinema. This analytical distillment of their ideas then, into their common root, supports a mode of film theory that incorporates the two in order to extend the effectiveness of their distance from realism, essentially augmenting the political message of Eisenstein's montage-centered theory with an emotional artistic recognition, and augmenting the narrative effect of Arnheim's depth and framing-centered theory with additional political relevance.

This new mode of film theory as a synthesis of Eisenstein's and Arnheim's ideas can be examined as stemming from the previously-neglected overlap between the theorists' ideas that lies in compositional perception as effective through a distancing or abstraction from realism, which itself can be analyzed within the technical specificities of the theorists' writings. Eisenstein's established concept of the visual and rhetorical conflict of montage acting as the essence of film and vehicle of meaning is really one direction he has taken in a departure from previous realism into active abstraction of the filmic image with a focus on how the temporal frame is perceived. He disagreed with the preceding idea that montage editing "would destroy the idea of real man," and argued instead that a more dialectically effective "characterization of man" comes about through a fragmentation of his qualities via montage itself (Eisenstein 38). In essence, the jarring visual effect of Eisenstein's montage as the more profound tool of filmic meaning displaces the vehicle of that meaning from a realistic human perception, and from the naturalistic long takes previously advocated as the supposed 'correct' way to capture artistic truth.

Eisenstein's focus on the linear, ideographic, and above-all compositional effect created by an abstraction of the subject from realism works collaboratively with Arnheim's concept of

the flattened image and camera position functioning as the artistic vehicles of film meaning as similarly distanced from reality. Arnheim's argument for film's qualification as a meaning-making art form through its perceptual difference from the reality-based image of the subject is supplemented by his example of the locomotive scene from *Berlin* and his logical claim that via these ideas, film's compositional meaning "is neither absolutely two-dimensional nor absolutely three-dimensional, but something between" which is "at once plane and solid" (Arnheim 209). Similarly to the transposition of subject imagery into a fragmented, abstracted form via montage, Arnheim's idea is also, at its core, removing or warping the cinematic subject into non-realistic perception which acts more effectively as a vehicle for artistic discourse than the subject as experienced realistically.

Even though interpretations of the two theories often get wrapped up in their contrasts or contradictions, such as where Eisenstein opposes long takes and Arnheim focuses away from disjunctive editing, their overarching overlap is constructed to be the perception of composition as artistic meaning-maker within the uniquely cinematic frame, as enabled by an abstracting of the image from realism. This common tie of fragmentary non-realism as rhetorical and aesthetic device characterizes both theorist's key examples of their ideas, which now act as illustrations of this overlap that synthesizes their arguments. The conflict created by montage intercutting of a massacre of workers and the slaughter of a cow in Eisenstein's *Strike* (1925), for example, displaces the perception of these subjects into a combative compositional sequence that creates new meaning out of its non-realism by a fragmentation of the imagery and an "appropriate association" of the "difference in material" (Eisenstein 36). Similarly, film's artistic power through a fragmented non-realism occurs in Arnheim's example of *The Docks of New York* (Sternberg 1928), in which a gunshot is conveyed not by a realistic perception of the event, but by displacing the filmic composition onto the sudden "rising of a flock of scared birds"

(Arnheim 210). This pictorial fragmentation of the filmic image away from a natural perception ties together both Eisenstein's and Arnheim's foci of the near-abstract quality of changing movement and depth in the pictorial quality of the image, in order to wield an associative power to convey artistic *and* political meaning via perception that conveys this meaning more effectively than a concept closer to an audience's perspective realism.

The formation of this theoretical Eisenstein-Arnheim compromise as a renewed perspective accounting for the cooperation of montage and depth/camera position to convey artistic meaning also examines the differing ideological motivations for the theorist's departures from realistic precedents in terms of where meaning in film resides. Eisenstein's conceptualization of montage as rhetorical vehicle in film builds itself in part on a backlash against the status quo at the time within Russian cinema. He rebukes anti-montage precedents as being the result of "an autocratic state that has propagated a state uniformity of thought," and further refines his stance by clarifying that a simplistic view of montage as shots "glued together" instead of acting through conflict to form synthesis is the "teaching of the old school of film-making" (Eisenstein 17). By setting himself politically against the realistic method of the 'old way' within Russian cinema, Eisenstein's montage theory was thereby shaped by this ideologically oppositional circumstance into the overlapping concept of perceptual distance from realism through a visual fragmentation. Arnheim's motivation for moving away from the perceptual 'Real,' though not as explicitly political in his writings, is similarly characterized by a departure from a naturalistic precedent in the filmic image. He establishes that meaning in early film "derived almost entirely from the subject matter" and that camera placement was limited to solely trying to capture an object in the picture, and then equates film art with a change in film practice in which filmmakers gradually took advantage of the specific capabilities of "cinematographic technique…to apply them toward the creation of artistic production" by means

of "perspective projection" (Arnheim 211). Arnheim therefore places filmic meaning within the qualities of cinematographic representation that specifically moved away from a previous realist mode, similarly to Eisenstein. Their synthesized theoretical overlap of abstracted and fragmented compositional perception as the vehicle of meaning in film therefore elucidates the theorists' differerent but similarly-structured motivations for an investment in the uniquely flattening, editable cinematographic effect of film to convey discourse, and is also itself augmented by the similarity of these ideological motivations.

Taking these ideological motivations into account, the politically- and artistically-exclusive limitations deconstructed within Eisenstein's and Arnheim's film theories are reconciled through this new synthesized theoretical perspective that analyzes and recognizes the overlap of their ideas as an idea that – since it acts from the root of these theories as a compositional distance from realistic perception – is therefore more widely applicable to the uniquely pictorial qualities of cinema since and beyond the original temporal and political context within which these theories were formulated and have usually been viewed. In particular, the significance of this synthesis lies in its power to propose a renewed examination of Eisenstein and Arnheim as precursors to subsequent concentrations on psychoanalysis and perception studies in film, and to later abstract experimental art cinema. The inherent compositional abstraction within the Eisenstein-Arnheim overlap (Eisenstein's focus on contrasting elements of visual form and movement and Arnheim's emphasis on the distortion and flattening of the filmic image) provides an early herald within film theoretical history to the fluctuating degree of subtle or extreme abstract imagery in film since its inception, functioning via the collaborative vehicle of a non-realistic perception that acts as the site of meaning within film as a distinct art form. This proposed new synthesis of the Eisenstein and Arnheim theories also garners applicable significance through highlighting the underemphasized common thread

of pre-psychoanalytical perception studies within these early ideas. The distance from realistic perception as embodied within compositional fragmentation and abstraction is therefore linked to an early contribution to film psychology with both incarnations of the idea - Eisenstein's montage conflict and Arnheim's image distortion. The contrasting juxtaposition of pictorial details, for example, "produces a perfectly finished representation of another order, the psychological" (Eisenstein 15). In agreement, an artistic meaning can "only come into play where reality and the medium of representation do not coincide" (Arnheim 215). The particular application of this new synthesis between the two theorists, then, stems not only from its reconciliation of the contrasts between the two and its recognition and construction of the common principle that elaborates further on their ideas and their broader applicability, but also from the opportunity it creates to more deeply analyze and build upon subsequent permutations of artistic meaning in film, particularly within psychoanalysis and abstract cinema.

Through an analysis, therefore, of the contrasts, logical fragmentations, and common ties between the theories of Eisenstein and Arnheim, an overlap emerges in the emphasis on film meaning-making through an associational non-realism of compositional perception within the uniquely cinematic frame. From this overlap is thus synthesized a renewed theoretical perspective which highlights the broadened applicability of the two compromised theories via their uses of this overlap, which accounts for film's political and narrative meaning being similarly conveyed through montage and perceptive depth/camera placement as a compositional vehicle for a flexible rhetoric of emotional and ideological meaning, and finally applies a deeper significance to the precedence of these theories to subsequent abstract and perception studies.

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