The Grundproblem in the Theory of Art

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Ivanov’s article presents background information and a methodological approach to Sergei Eisenstein’s two-volume work on the method of art. Eisenstein himself considered film to be an art in which the basic problem of art is clearly visible. He argued that successfully combining regressive and progressive elements in art can solve the problem of form and content. The article demonstrates the personal cooperation that took place between Eisenstein, Marr, Luria, and Vygotsky at the beginning of 1930’s.

The “basic problem” in the theory of art, according to Eisenstein, is that there takes place in art “a rapid, progressive ascension up a series of lofty, notional steps of consciousness and a simultaneous penetration through the structure of the form into the layers of the deepest sensuous thinking” (vol. 2, p. 120). Therefore, beginning in the 1930s Eisenstein was preoccupied with the task of a scientific description and conscious assimilation of “sensuous thinking.” Here Eisenstein anticipated the future research program that was recently formulated most clearly by Academician A. N. Kolmogorov: “Conditioned reflexes are intrinsic to all vertebrates, but logical thinking did not emerge until the very last stage of the development of man. None of the forms of synthetic activity of human consciousness that preceded formal logical thinking and go beyond the framework...
of elementary conditioned reflexes have been described yet in the language of cybernetics” (Kolmogorov, 1964, p. 54).

To study certain phenomena of style (e.g., Zola and Manet with their undifferentiated expression), Eisenstein found it necessary to use a comparison not with sensuous thinking but with the even earlier “pre–thinking-in-general stage,” by citing the special characteristics of integrated perception of spiders (according to Kretschmer and Hempelmann).

The range of Eisenstein’s thoughts about the movement from archaic, integrated thinking to the conceptual kind was especially close to the conclusions of Eisenstein’s friend, the psychologist L.S. Vygotsky, who established that the development of conceptual thinking in children is preceded by integrated thinking, which deals with entire bundles of objects that are unified by characteristics that, in terms of adult logic, seem insignificant (Vygotsky, 1956, 1960). Eisenstein incorporated these ideas of Vygotsky when he wrote—after Vygotsky’s death—in Montage [Montazh] about the transformation of “children’s integrated thinking” (vol. 2, p. 386) into the conscious thinking of an adult, which is based on a differentiating principle.

To do a systematic analysis of “the problems of the emerging cinematic language (especially based on the film October),” Eisenstein had to meet regularly with his friends, the psychologists L.S. Vygotsky1 and A.R. Luria, and with N.Ia. Marr. As he later recalled, “we even started to do this, but untimely death took away two of them” (Vygotsky and Marr) (M., draft of a foreword).

The similarity between the ideas of Eisenstein and Vygotsky lay in the fact that, unlike the anthropologists and linguists who influenced him (in particular, Lévy-Bruhl and Marr) and unreservedly dated prelogical thinking to antiquity and even to archaic societies, Eisenstein was interested primarily in the manifestation of this thinking in the life and art of contemporary man. Eisenstein found in our customary, everyday behavior manifestations of the same makeup of thinking that does not distinguish between the sign and the denotatum:

The boundary between types is movable, and an affect that is not even too sharp is sufficient for a personality that may be very logically judicious to suddenly react with its never-dormant arsenal of forms of sensual thinking and the standards of behavior that flow from that. When a girl to whom we have been unfaithful tears up a photograph “in
a fit of temper,” thereby destroying the “wicked cheater,” she instantly replicates the purely magical operation of destroying the person by destroying his image (which is based on an early identification of the image with the object). (vol. 2, p. 119)

These conclusions by Eisenstein, where archaic behavior is described through the concepts of the theory of signs (the relationship between the image and the denotatum) echo the research that was done by Vygotsky in the 1930s (when he began the joint sessions with Eisenstein) but was not published for the first time until 1960. The same range of thoughts includes attempts by Eisenstein to trace the vestigial traces of ancient “instinctive” actions such as knot-weaving and hunting in the higher domains of activity of modern man (e.g., in art—see vol. 2, p. 303 et seq.). In forms of modern man’s behavior such as playing solitaire, Vygotsky found vestiges of the oldest types of behavioral control by means of signs created by man himself (Vygotsky, 1960).

Eisenstein asserts in Grundproblem that there is no form in art without a tendency “toward regression,” just as there is no content without a tendency “toward progress.”

According to Eisenstein:

Art is . . . one of the methods and paths of learning. And it is the kind of learning that not so much interprets the image according to the standards of a certain stage of development of thinking but itself constructs images according to these standards of thinking, and retains in the structure of these images the concepts that express . . . the mode of thinking itself. The plane of a painting, the shape of a building, the plastic tendency of a monument—all of them, from this perspective, are similar to the sedimentary rock on which the ancient pterodactyls’ imprints were deposited. . . . They are similar to beachheads that, in a sense, have miraculously retained traces of battles and combat within the consciousness of their creators. (M).

The psyche of an artistically gifted personality, according to Eisenstein, must possess an expressed “regressive” component in addition to a “progressive” one. But it turns out that

a strong and remarkable personality . . . is precisely one in which, despite the sharp intensity of both components, the progressive element proves to be the leading one that subdues the other. This is the absolutely essential balance of power within an artistically creative personality, because the regressive component is the component of sensual thinking, which is absolutely necessary for this purpose, and
unless it has a pronounced presence the artist—the image-creator—is simply impossible. And at the same time, a person who is unable to control this domain with a purposeful aspiration of the will, while inevitably under the power of the sensual element, is destined not so much for creativity as for madness. (M, the chapter “Rilke II”)

Eisenstein explained why he formulated the “basic problem” of aesthetic while engaged with the cinema by pointing out that this phenomenon appears “in the purest form” in the cinema.

The conclusion that ancient archetypal situations constantly came to life in his own art was already drawn by Eisenstein with respect to The General Line, right after he finished it. In drafts for the article “How The General Line Was Made,” Eisenstein, foreshadowing his later formulations of the “basic problem,” refers to the “atavism” of the film and enumerates the “eternal story lines” in it: (1) “Moses and the rock. The Holy Grail. The cream separator. (2) The abduction of Europe. Martha and the bull. (3) The Apis bull. The apocalypse. (4) David and Goliath (Zharov and Vaska)” (TsGALI [Central State Archives of Literature and Art], folio 1923, list 1, storage item 1034).

Later, as well, Eisenstein’s attention was focused—in accordance with his general orientation toward studying the syntax of a situation—not so much on a study of the congealed symbol as on the structure of basic situations.

One of the rough notes for Grundproblem (GP) is revealing in this regard. In it Eisenstein points out (with reference to Freidenberg’s book The Poetics of Plot and Genre [Poetika siuzheta i zhanra]) that one must not focus only on the “content of metaphors” while ignoring the “structure of the metaphor” that is developing into the “structure of the situation”; at the same time, Eisenstein notes parenthetically: “the same thing as Freud with his way station of sexualism” (GP). The basic thesis of The Method [Metod], which is repeated in its conclusion (“An Approach to Impressionism: The Question of the Circus”) is the notion that, for all the variability of the themes and targets of works, which change virtually every day, art is characterized by “the stability of the general patterns by which they transmute into a sensually affecting form. . . . The historicity in the realm of form is reflected in the immutability of the general patterns and unity of the resources from where the entire set of what goes into the method of art is drawn” (M). Historicity is also apparent.
in the selection of specific and certain features as the leading ones by specific epochs. This is true both of specific genres (the fairy tale, the elegy, the drama) and of entire “styles of epochs” (e.g., impressionism or surrealism) and the distinctive characteristics of the style of specific writers. The more “individualistic” the writer, the more consistently he adheres not only to the theme of the content by which he is possessed and the more clearly he adheres to one or a few features from the “general resources” as the leading, immutable, and characteristic one. (M)

This is also the reason for the dislike of all alien features (as was the case with Tolstoy). At the same time, Eisenstein added the caveat that there are writers who are characterized by an all-embracing use of nearly all features: Pushkin, Shakespeare, Goethe; he sought special explanations for this (regarding Pushkin in particular).

For various types of art, beginning with its “primal image”—the ornament—Eisenstein considered it mandatory “to combine two forms of vision and perception—a reflection of reality refracted through consciousness and its reflection through the prism of sensual thinking” (the section “Photography Not Allowed. I Am Writing,” M). In early forms of art this duality is manifested in the presence of an image and in the first “stylizing attempts to design what was depicted.” Subsequently the same “dual unity of perception” explains the increasing complexity of the form of art, right up to the development of individual styles and the appearance of elements of “a theory of the method of art.”

Behind the “ultramodern guises” Eisenstein (quite in the spirit of “the paleontology of plot” of Marr’s school, in particular O.M. Freidenberg, from whom, however, he differed, in his own words, in his attention to the vestigial character of the structure itself, not only of the plot) sought to find “the very distant, very deep origins of concepts.” For example, in *L’age de Juliette*, by J. Deval, Eisenstein saw, behind the protagonists’ pair of bathrobes, the animal hides of their distant ancestors, and behind “the glistening tile of the bathroom at the Ritz, awash in electricity, the secret trails and greenery of the tropical forest”: unaware of this himself, “Deval forces both the characters and viewer to get closer to the most ancient forms of amorous interaction between living creatures, to touch the forms of the amorous coming-together of human ancestors that
are still beyond the boundaries of actual human stages” (M, chapter marked January 9, 1944).

Eisenstein regarded the use in art of “an unlimited number . . . of primordial norms of sensual behavior” as a prerequisite for art to exert an effect, and he gave a sociological explanation for the choice of each such “norm” in a specific work:

Why at certain stages the leading role falls either to one or to the other source that is equally rooted in the “prehistorical” primitive state stems each time from the complexion of the epoch, which draws from the depths of sensual influences precisely the distinctive feature from the arsenal of any possibilities that are most effective precisely in the conditions of its historical existence. (*Grundproblem II*, M)

Eisenstein cites as an example the shift “from filmmaking with little plot to filmmaking with plot,” which can be found in his own work.

Eisenstein believed that the reason for the especially powerful effect of plays and films with a loose plot was that their very construction was “a fragment from the most ancient stage of consciousness—a purely diffuse consciousness that had not yet identified a leading source, precisely the way it is still absent at the social stage . . . of which its structure turns out to be a fragment (*Grundproblem II*, M).

The *Grundproblem* is an experiment of rationalistic understanding—and thereby overcoming—of the very aspects of art that seemed irrational to Eisenstein.

During these years, the study of prelogical thinking by Lévy-Bruhl (and Marr) and of the unconscious by Freud was being conducted on broad experimental material. But Eisenstein’s aesthetic theory was based on a simultaneous assertion of the necessity of a sensual (regressive) source and a logical (progressive) one, which are unified in every work of art. In Eisenstein’s words, “the intrathematic collision in a situation and a plot is always a collision between the connections of specific wings to various stages of human development. Just as an adult is a struggle between the primitively (both hereditarily and phylogenetically) infantile and the progressively advanced” (GP, December 21, 1943). Eisenstein had a *separate* distaste for both the logical and the prelogical (cf. the above-mentioned formulation of the modern cybernetic approach to this problem).
Eisenstein’s interest in the characters of Apollo and Dionysus, which was also embodied in his drawings, is also attributable to his notion of the dual unity or dichotomy of art:

The personification of my “sources,” which in their interpenetration generate an artistic image, is, of course, Dionysus and Apollo. Dionysus is prelogic; Apollo, logic. Diffuse and distinct. Dusky and clear. Natural like an animal and wise like the sun, and so on. (One could go on and on.) Hence the question: Do the Greeks have a synthesis anywhere of the source of the Dionysian and the Apollonian? If so, where? It turns out that they do. And in the most suitable place: in . . . Orpheus (the performer!). . . . It is proper that this synthesis occurs precisely in Orpheus, the singer and father of the arts.

These notes, done at the same time as Eisenstein’s triptych, consisting of drawings “Apollo,” “Dionysus,” and “Orpheus,” are not only interesting as commentary on these drawings. They expressed with the utmost clarity the idea of the coalescence of two opposite sources in art that permeates all of Eisenstein’s late-period writings.

In the above quotation, Eisenstein provides a relatively benign formulation of this “basic problem” (Grundproblem) of aesthetics as he interprets it: it assumes that a unity (always Eisenstein’s desired objective and favorite word) of the logical and the prelogical has been achieved. But this formulation was preceded (and, in part, was followed) by others where this basic problem was perceived as a catastrophe, in which Eisenstein began to fight art, sensing that it was, to some extent, a regressive force (or one opposed to life) that led back to the deep-seated, prehistorical origins of preconsciousness.

For art (as for both magic and rituals), Eisenstein believed that the most important prerequisite for its correct perception was not so much the original understanding that it is imaginary as the direct “treatment”:

that is imposed above all on a person who is “destined” to enter the circle of sensual thinking, where he will lose the distinction between the subjective and the objective, where his ability to perceive the whole through the part (pars pro toto), where colors will begin to sing to him and where sounds will seem to have a shape (synesthetics), where the suggestive word will make him react as if the fact itself signified by the word has occurred (hypnotic behavior). (“Cinema and the Main Features of the Method of Art. Die rhytmische Trommel,” GP)
In a handwritten foreword to a planned collection of articles (or to the entire monograph of The Method), written during the war in Alma-Ata, Eisenstein recalled a time (1932–33) when reflections about the immersion in the early stages of sensual thinking that is mandatory for art led him back to a debate with art, as in the early 1920s: “The time comes when precisely these concepts—‘regression,’ ‘moving in reverse,’ ‘backward movement’—begin slyly to snake their way into the soul. And they emit a hiss that in tone resembles the remarks whispered long ago about art as a ‘pernicious fiction,’ and so on” (M., draft of the foreword). Eisenstein recalled these objections to art, which had reemerged in him in connection with the study of the “basic problem” of the theory of art, just as at one time, in the 1920s, he had rebelled against the “fictitiousness” of art:

What mechanics underlie this sacred art to which I have become a servant! It is not merely a lie. It is not merely a deception. It is mischief. Terrible, awful mischief. After all, given this opportunity—to fictitiously achieve satisfaction—who will decide to seek it in a result of real-life, authentic actualization . . .” (vol. 2, 100–101)

While Eisenstein’s principal objection to art in the 1920s was its fictitiousness, during his crisis of the 1930s, he lodged an even more substantive complaint against art: “Therefore: exposure to art leads the viewer into cultural regression. After all, the ‘mechanism’ of art is honed as a means of leading people away from rational logic, of ‘immersing’ them in sensual thinking and thereby generating emotional eruptions in them” (M., draft of the foreword). Based on the parallels to the aesthetic immersion in sensual thinking that are drawn from psychopathology, one could have inferred that in art as well this immersion is achieved “at the cost of exposure to the mechanisms by which alcohol operates, temporarily paralyzing the differentiating activity of the frontal lobes and immersing the person in the stage of diffusely sensory notions and being. Or worse, acting in step with schizophrenia, which paralyzes this activity forever” (ibid.).

Eisenstein recalled that during that crisis of the 1930s he was willing to remember the arguments that Nordau once made in Degeneration against Wagner and the synthesis of art. Eisenstein “was dissuaded from his intention, if not to destroy art, then in any case to abandon this shameful activity, by the late Vygotsky.” According to Eisenstein, Vygotsky’s eyes glistened with sadness
as he “tried to dissuade me from my wicked intentions, which were accompanied by the most degrading epithets hurled at sacred art” (ibid.). In the same draft Eisenstein confessed: “The tragic inner ‘rending of the soul’ loomed like a Calvary to me” (ibid.).

Eisenstein himself felt that he had overcome this conflict with art by 1935, when, for the first time, he publicly delivered a detailed report on the “basic problem” of art. But there is no question that the “basic problem” remained the focus of his attention—no longer as an agonizing inner torment but as a topic of reflection that continually concerned him—until his very death.

The moral crisis in Eisenstein’s attitude toward art was, in essence, based on the fact that, by accepting the thesis of art’s genetic link to the regressive areas of the psyche, Eisenstein applied to those areas the negative assessment that, for example, Jung did not give the archetypes (neutral ones that could be used in any way). Eisenstein essentially combined two different things—an examination of the genetic roots of art and an assessment of those origins that dates back (with certain modifications) to the dualistic doctrines in their Christianized form. Art seemed to be associated with dark, “diabolical” forces.

Eisenstein formulated in Grundproblem the pattern that was noted in regard to the same range of questions by Thomas Mann in his novel about modern art: “The interesting phenomena of life . . . apparently always have a double face, which is turned to the past and to the future, they apparently are always simultaneously progressive and regressive” (Mann, 1955, p. 263). The hero of Mann’s novel creates a system that is “capable of subjugating human reason to magic.” Similar thoughts were expressed in a letter from Franz Kafka to Max Brod:

Creativity is a sweet, wonderful reward, but for what? Tonight it became clear to me . . . that this reward is for serving the devil. This descent to the dark powers, this unshackling of spirits bound by nature, these dubious embraces and whatever else may take place in the nether parts that you do not see at the top when you write your stories in the sunlight.* Perhaps another kind of creativity exists; I only know this kind: I remember when fear prevents me from sleeping, I only know this kind. And I see the diabolical in it very clearly. (Kafka, 1968, p. 134)

*Taken partly from www.nhinet.org/panichas17-1&2.pdf.—Trans.
The most profound similarity between the theory of the “basic problem” and the line of modern semiotic art studies and literary criticism (cf. Duran, 1961; and others), which was influenced by psychoanalysis and analytical psychology, may be seen in Eisenstein’s interpretation of “reference” (archetypal) situations. One of the main ideas of Eisenstein’s Grundproblem is to identify a set of reference situations and symbols, such as an exchange of clothing. Each of the works of art that interests Eisenstein is described through these reference situations. But unlike the psychoanalytic researchers, Eisenstein views the use of these situations primarily as a collision of two social epochs.

According to Eisenstein, “the subject matter of a work of art exerts an effect only when . . . today’s variable, particular plot incident is seated on a block that fits the patterns of the situation or position defined by the primordial norm of social behavior” (M).

Citing Veselovsky’s (1940) view of plot as a form of the embodiment of an idea, Eisenstein criticized Veselovsky for looking at the refraction through epics of the primary situations that evolved in ancient societies. The epic is too close to the epoch when these situations took shape; they are “interesting . . . as the framework for later and modern plot compositions” (GP, November 15, 1941, Alma-Ata). It is obvious from this entry that the main idea of Grundproblem had already formed by the fall of 1941.

As an example of a primary situation that is formulated in different plot variations during different epochs, Eisenstein cited the schema that is common to King Lear, Old Goriot, and Zola’s The Earth: a father divides up his fortune among his children during his lifetime, in the hope that they will care for him, but they cast him off to penury. Realizing his error too late, the destitute father is overcome with impotent anger. Eisenstein saw in this situation the trace of an early realization of the self as a part of a whole, hence the notion that whoever divides up a whole goes “mad.” The closer the plot gets to the primary situation in its general formula, the more effective the work is:

In Balzac, as the story edges closer to the specific tendency that is associated for him with a similar situation, there is a decline in the “sensual” power associated with the more generalized outline in which he presents this idea. . . . So Old Goriot is emotionally more gripping, and hence more popular, than the cognitively very respected but much less entertaining The Peasantry. And this is probably because in The Peasantry, the logically applied details in which the protest against the
division of the land is expressed are much more focused on today’s aspect of the theme than *Le Père Goriot*, where a cursory situational allusion establishes even more strongly a link to the “primeval” strata of the past. (M)

Another aspect that Eisenstein links to his study of the evocations of this primary situation in Balzac is Balzac’s idea (in his notebook) of the “Anti-Lear” or the “Anti-Goriot”—the story of a man who is supported by his 400 children.

According to Eisenstein, in art “an effective structure . . . that inevitably reproduces primary situations . . . in general is a figurative realization of an immutable pattern” (M. chapter marked January 9, 1944). In other words, one can discover in the structures of works of art certain figurative evocations of primary (archaic) situations whose general (“timeless”) pattern is also true of all subsequent epochs. As Eisenstein puts it:

An effect is inevitable if both of two . . . conditions are met: (a) the condition that the timeless formula of a standard conflict is followed, and (b) the most pointedly contemporary problem is substituted in it—the type of conflict that is historically relevant and particular to today. This is achieved by Shakespeare. He infuses the eternal formula—his conflict—with his contemporary. (ibid.)

Eisenstein cites as examples Shakespeare’s plays, whose structure he examines from the standpoint of the transformation of the material of primary sources to express a strictly Shakespearean theme. From this perspective, what is important in *The Merchant of Venice* is “the change in morality with regard to the system of justice; in *Hamlet*, the change in “the concept of the vendetta and the blood feud”; in *Othello*, the change in “the concept of ownership of a woman”; in *Romeo and Juliet*, the same with regard to “relation of sex” (the relationship between the sexes). In Eisenstein’s thinking:

A conflict such as that in *Romeo and Juliet* is inevitable in nearly every change of generations. It is manifested especially sharply during a period of rigoristically ossifying principles of class or social institutions. That is, at times of an impending, inevitable cleanup, their features and principles turn in on themselves in an especially indestructible, lifeless, immobile way. The principles then resemble the old, ruined aristocrats—the poorer they were, the more rigoristic they were in their very strict observance of their traditions, rules of behavior, standards of morality, etc. (ibid.)
As an example of the evocation of the same theme in early-twentieth-century literature, Eisenstein cites Deval’s *L’age de Juliette*, commenting that here, as in other, similar cases, “the pointedly contemporary nature of the theme substitutes other *valeur’*s (values [in the mathematical sense]—V.I.] for the algebraic symbols of the formula” (ibid.).

In his analysis of the structure of *Romeo and Juliet* in *The Method*, as well as in his examination of *Die Walküre* in *The Embodiment of Myth*, Eisenstein analyzes the primary (vestigial) situation whose “subversion” is the basis of the plots of these works. According to Eisenstein’s formulation, which can be made fully consistent with the conclusions of the latest ethnological research simply by omitting the term “totemic” (replacing it with another one or refining its meaning), the subject here is “the subversion of the institution of totemic marital precepts that allow marriage between established and immutable totemic groups and proscribe marriages outside these specific totemic clans” (M., chapter dated January 9, 1944, written in Alma-Ata).

In his notes to *Grundproblem*, Eisenstein underscored more than once the role of the exogamous in explaining not only social relations but also the structure of the pantheon.

In the myth of Aras about the origin of human beings from creatures that grew into one, Eisenstein noted that the god who separated human beings from one another also gave them “the arrangement of marriage clans” (GP, part II, “On Totemism . . .”). Here the development from the primitive lack of differentiation in the myth itself is associated with the introduction of dual-exogamous organization (as in many other myths that were studied in detail from this perspective by A. M. Zolotarev).

Notes

1. In later recalling his plans to work with Vygotsky, Eisenstein wrote that he had had a strong affection for “this wonderful man with the strangely cropped hair. It seemed to have grown out permanently, as after typhus or another illness when the head is shaved. Gazing out at the world from under this strange array of hair were the eyes, clear and transparent as the sky, of one of the most brilliant psychologists of our time” (M, draft of the foreword).

2. Cf., in part, the similar approach to *Hamlet* in Vygotsky’s book (Vygotsky, 1968), the manuscript for which, with many notations by
Eisenstein, has survived in his archives. The idea of evoking a certain original theme with a specific combination of situations, which is similar to the “generative” (or more precisely, synthesizing) poetics projected in the cybernetic works of recent years, was explained by Eisenstein with results from Shakespeare studies: “The key point to which the reworking in the plays boiled down, aside from the beauty of the language, the knowledge of the human heart and temperament and Shakespearean theatrical dexterity, was invariably the fact that a certain combination of situations from previous drama assumed the character of a material evocation of some basic thought and theme. Events develop and redevelop in such a manner that they start to become a figurative adaptation of a certain thesis that is expressed in the fullest way specifically through them. Perhaps this is proven, not in such ‘shorthand terminology’ but in a sense close to this, by the writings of the majority of Shakespeare scholars” (Grundproblem II, M). As an example, Eisenstein in a few of his notes analyzes Shakespeare’s Hamlet in its attitude toward Thomas Kyd’s The Spanish Tragedy, which is constructed as a conventional play about revenge.

References