

Sergei Eisenstein

The rhythm of ecstasy: the sex drawings, 1931-1948

July 12—August 4, 2024

For pioneering film director Sergei Eisenstein (Riga, 1898—Moscow, 1948), drawing was fundamental to his filmic and theoretical practices—if one should differentiate them. Starting from an early age, drawing was a recurrent activity for Eisenstein. A curious child, he was fascinated by the graphic work of artists such as Honoré Daumier and Jacques Callot.¹ As his teenage friends would recall, Eisenstein had a true passion for drawing, spending countless hours exercising his imagination humorously. Some of his drawings were published by newspapers in Saint Petersburg, and he would draw caricatures, sketches, and stage designs for theatre productions. Nevertheless, he was most prolific at drawing during his time in Mexico (1931–1932) for the occasion of a film project that he eventually had to leave unfinished. The so-called ‘sex drawings’—coined by historian Joan Neuberger—which were kept hidden for long, abound in this time as a result of an emancipation from censorship in a tremendously inspiring moment in his career. In them we observe an array of sexual intercourses, fantasies, and obscenities in explicitly queer combinations. They bear witness to Eisenstein’s philosophical inquiries, queer sexual expression and repression, and a great sense of humour. Back in the Soviet Union in 1932, he would continue to draw until his death in 1948, yet under very different circumstances. The drawings in this exhibition attest to the complex, multi-faceted, and fascinating artistry of Sergei Eisenstein. This exhibition presents a remarkable and significant artistic production whilst seeking to foreground the queer potentialities of his work, contending queerness as an integral component of his life and work, and claiming him as a queer pioneer in the history of art.

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Between 1929 and 1931, prior to his time in Mexico, Eisenstein travelled to Europe and the United States. The goal was all along to visit Hollywood and study his American

counterparts from United Artists, who had extended him an invitation given the fame and notoriety that *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) had granted him. Eisenstein, accompanied by his assistant Grigori Alexandrov and regular cameraman Eduard Tisse, landed in Berlin to obtain a U.S. visa, as at the time it was not possible to obtain one in Moscow given the absence of diplomatic relationships between the countries, and meanwhile seize the opportunity to attend the European première of his film *The General Line* (1929). Nevertheless, after notifying his American counterparts of his arrival in Berlin, he received the message that his trip to the United States was unfeasible at the time. As a result, Eisenstein was stuck in Europe for over half a year, yet it was not in vain. He travelled across the continent, from Zurich to London, Amsterdam to Antwerp, giving lectures, meeting intellectuals, and reading the most recent publications on anthropology, ethnography, and sexology. It was also in Europe where Eisenstein came into contact with several queer scenes and started inquiring about queerness in a more extroverted way. In Berlin, Eisenstein frequented *Eldorado*, a famous cabaret known for transvestism. It is documented that Eisenstein also visited the Magnus Hirschfeld Institute for Sex Research, the first sexology research centre in the world, which was actively working to decriminalise homosexuality and advocating for LGBT rights. There, Eisenstein was able to rummage through their extensive library on gender, homosexuality, and eroticism, and even engage in discussions about his own bisexuality. Of similar impact was his time in France, where Eisenstein visited venues such as the *Magic-City Bal*, the hotspot of Parisian homosexual life, and discovered the practice of male prostitution in Toulon and Marseille.

In Paris he also befriended and met Jean Cocteau in multiple occasions. Arguably, Eisenstein read and saw the homoerotic illustrations of Cocteau's *Le livre blanc* (1928), which influenced him stylistically to a degree. The short novel narrates the queer awakening of its protagonist, who comes to terms with his attraction to men throughout several encounters in his life. The extent of their bond can be observed in a letter from February 13, 1930, in which Cocteau invited Eisenstein to attend the general rehearsal of his play *La voie humaine*, concluding with the following line: "I love you and admire you. Please try to come and see this attempt of an artist to come out of himself and become anonymous".²

Paris was also a defining time for Eisenstein in regards to his films and his theoretical work, especially in relation to his forthcoming Mexican project, developing what Marie Rebecchi has coined as *anthropology of the moving image*.³ In his *Memoirs*, Eisenstein states that in Paris he befriended the "left democratic wing of Surrealists", a group of artists dissident to the predominant Surrealist group. In a lecture at the Sorbonne, Eisenstein declared that although he saw great distance between the Surrealists and him, he could identify some similarities, mainly that they both drew from the subconscious; while the Surrealists would do it by means of 'automatic writing' films, Eisenstein did it through montage—his biggest contribution to cinema, consisting of selecting, editing, and assembling together different shots to conform a continuous whole. In Paris he also fervidly read ethnography books and articles from authors such as Georges Bataille, Anita Brenner, James Franzer, and Lucien Lévy-

Bruhl. ‘Pre-logical modes of consciousness’ and ‘sensory thinking’ were of particular interest to him, which he later developed at large while shooting his film in Mexico.

His exposure to queer life also continued in the United States in spring of 1930 once he managed to obtain a visa thanks to a contract with the film studio Paramount. In New York City, the writer Lincoln Kirstein and the associate director of MoMA Jere Abbott showed Eisenstein around the city’s downtown queer scene. In the drawing *Drag New York* (September 26, 1942), presented in this exhibition, Eisenstein reminisces a drag show he had attended in Harlem. Once in Mexico, and later on back in the Soviet Union, Eisenstein would look back and express what he witnessed in Europe and New York in several of his drawings.

In Los Angeles, Eisenstein would spend time with Charlie Chaplin and Walt Disney—for whom he had great admiration. Under the prospects of shooting several films with Paramount, Eisenstein was introduced to the Hollywood life of the 1930s and was marketed as a groundbreaker director who would make films in America. Simultaneously, however, an anti-Soviet and antisemitic sentiment began crystallising in rumours and pamphlets such as “Eisenstein, Hollywood’s Messenger from Hell”, which described him as a dangerous Bolshevik Jew working undercover for the Soviet Union to brainwash American citizens through his films. The incendiary remarks on Eisenstein continued to burn in the following months, and culminated in the inclusion of his name in a report on communist activities in America by an anti-Communist congressman, forcing Paramount to break ties with Eisenstein in the autumn of 1930. Yet this was not the end of Eisenstein’s journey.

Right before his forced return to Russia, Eisenstein met Upton Sinclair and Mary Craig Sinclair, a wealthy and left-wing activist married couple who agreed to finance Eisenstein’s new project: an epic account of the millennial history of Mexico and its syncretic culture. In December 1930, Eisenstein and his crew left the United States and settled in Mexico, inaugurating what is arguably the most fascinating chapter of Eisenstein’s life and career.

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Eisenstein’s fourteen-month journey across Mexico proved to be exhilarating and prolific. It was then that Eisenstein went back to drawing ceaselessly, in a stimulating environment fuelled by a cinematic project that allowed him to carry out an ambitious and experimental visual anthropology of Mexico, heavily inspired by the political and artistic endeavours of artists such as Diego Rivera—whom he had met in Moscow in 1927—David Alfaro Siqueiros, and José Clemente Orozco. It was also in Mexico where Eisenstein was able to be his most queer self, experiencing what would most likely be his first romantic and sexual affair with a man, a scholar of comparative religion named Jorge Palomino y Cañedo. In a letter to his secretary and confidante Pera Atasheva—whom he would marry in 1934—Eisenstein wrote that for the first time in his life, he was “experiencing and not evaluating”, that he had “crushed the complex that has been weighing down on [him] for ten years (or

more),” that he had managed to go “all the way” with a ‘love object’, experiencing a full orgasmic sexual experience, bringing him to a most blissful state.⁴

The drawings he realised during his time in Mexico, and specifically the sexual drawings, are unequivocally queer not only in their depiction of homosexuality; queerness is also found in their philosophical underlining as well as in their humorous content. As his drawings are thematically and aesthetically fundamental to his films and theoretical writing, it is fair to note that queerness is an inseparable component in them. In order to bring a queer reading of them to the fore, it is relevant to know about the relationship Eisenstein had with the body and sex from throughout his life, as well as the literature and ideas that influenced his views on them.

Growing up, Eisenstein had a difficult and conflicting relationship with sex. The troubled relationship his parents had, which led to their divorce, led to resentment for a mother he saw as promiscuous and castrating, and a father who was authoritarian and uncommunicative about sex. His first education on sex was found in a bunch of books hidden in his mother’s apartment.⁵ These books, unsuitable for children and some containing illustrations, were Octave Mirabeau’s *The Garden of Torments* (1899), Leopold Sacher-Masoch’s *Venus in Furs* (1870), Marquis de Sade’s *The Story of Juliette or Vice Amply Rewarded* (1797)—the final version of which, *The New Justine*, he read during his time in Mexico—and Richard von Krafft-Ebbing’s *Psychopathia sexualis* (1866). These first images of sensuality, teeming with sadism, cruelty, lewdness, and eroticism, made a deep impression in young Eisenstein, and undoubtedly influenced his own erotic and pornographic drawings. Equally influential was a later reading of Sigmund Freud’s *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood* (1910), in which he came across the idea that sex could be sublimated into creativity, and learnt about the hypothesis of homosexuality in Da Vinci, whose masculinity had been suppressed by an overbearing mother—an experience Eisenstein could relate to.⁶ Similarly impactful was reading Otto Weininger’s *Sex and Character* (1903), whose concept of universal bisexuality became popular in early twentieth-century Russia. Weininger played a big role in Eisenstein’s theoretical work, not only in the development of his own theory of bisexuality, but also in developing his concept of ecstasy in art. Despite the popularity of new ideas on sex and gender in Bolshevik Russia, fostered by a wave of Marxist feminism in the political life of the Soviet Union spearheaded by figures like Alexandra Kollontai, the 1920s Soviet society remained ambivalent about homosexuality. Though no longer a crime, it was still considered a sexual pathology particular to the bourgeoisie that could be fixed by science and medicine and would disappear under socialism. The pathologisation of queerness impacted Eisenstein, who felt repressed and ill until he was exposed to the prominent queer subcultures of early 1930s in Europe and in the United States.

Eisenstein theorised bisexuality as a powerful dialectical unity of opposites that exist at the primordial stage in one’s evolution before sexual differentiation.⁷ In his view, bisexuality was a manifestation of a deeply rooted desire in every human being to get rid of binaries and transgress fixed identities and categorisations.⁸ For Eisenstein, art had the

capacity to appeal to our earliest experiences as human beings, which, in juxtaposition with rational thinking developed as we grow up, produces *ecstasy*: an explosive, transcendental, and transformative experience that negates the split between mind and body and exposes a holistic view of the world. In his view, the technique of montage was the means to express ecstasy in cinema: “Haven’t I mentioned anywhere yet that a montage cut is the ecstatic state of the shot?”⁹

Inspirational to his desire to attain this ecstatic experience was writer D.H. Lawrence’s advocacy for a sexuality that is liberated from taboos, rooted in a universal pansexuality that has been confounded by religion and class. The idea of a primordial state of humanity where sexuality is not compartmentalised and shamed upon was of great interest to Eisenstein, hence his pronounced fascination for ‘pre-logical’ states and the suspension of the schism between nature and culture found throughout cosmologies and knowledge systems of Indigenous peoples, including those in the history of Mexico, which he studied before and during his journey in the country. In line with coetaneous ethnography and psychology, Eisenstein believed that people living in pre-modern cultures in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries represented all human societies at earlier stages of cultural evolution.¹⁰

Analysing Eisenstein’s theory of bisexuality, Joan Neuberger argues that “bisexuality is the line that links our animal past and our refined future because it is inherently synthetic, both in primordial, infantile forms and in modern, adult forms. Both undifferentiated, infantile sexuality and orgasmic, reproductive sexual congress are dialectics that produce *ekstasis* – explosive, momentary, ecstatic synthesis, an out-of-body experience of transcendence and transformation.”¹¹ This regression to a primordial state led him to research evolutionary theories, which sparked an interest in animality as a precedent of humanity. Eisenstein also found inspiring associations likening animal features with individual human beings as metaphors in ancient literature such as Homer and the Rigveda.¹² Interestingly, in his drawings there is an abundance of animal characters and zoophilic sex. As Jean-Claude Marcadé argues, Eisenstein learnt about the evolutionary turn from plant-life to animal-life, and how there is a past of human sexuality that at some point was informed by animal sex in the work of Sándor Ferenczi, a Hungarian neurologist and disciple of Sigmund Freud.¹³

For Eisenstein, desire was about merging and eradicating difference, if only temporarily in an ecstatic moment. Eisenstein felt that he could reach a state that gave him access to something akin to a prenatal, pre-logical nirvana through the drawing process; a kind of ‘automatic drawing’, analogous to the surrealists’ automatic writing which he familiarised himself with during his time in Paris.¹⁴ In his own words, he defined ecstasy “as a concentrated psychological (emotional) perception of dialectics”.¹⁵ The sex drawings often reveal the dialectical opposites through the intense experience of sex, often accompanied with a certain kind of uninhibited violence or cruelty.

In Mexico he realised that the use of montage in his film would provide him with a visualisation of a dialectic between regressiveness and ecstasy. On the one hand, a biological

regression towards carnality—the primeval cruelty of animal and human sacrifice—and the ecstatic-religious syncretism manifested in Eisenstein’s idea of the simultaneous coexistence of pre-Columbian and Catholic rites.¹⁶ In the Mexican footage, both the cruelty and the homoeroticism are linked to the experience of ecstasy: religious, sexual, and artistic.¹⁷ It is perhaps the bullfight scene that encapsulates most of the aforementioned elements: ecstatic experiences, a proximity to death, homoerotic elements of the spectacle, decorative excess, and the tension between the artificiality of the spectacle and the its centrality in the forces of nature, represented by the bull.¹⁸

Humour and cruelty are a recurrent pair in Eisenstein’s sex drawings. In them, we often observe power dynamics in a big partner sexually dominating a smaller one, both in domestic or intimate scenarios and in group BDSM happenings. Humiliation and sadism were present in his imagination from an early age after reading Marquis de Sade and other erotic literature, and he applied them extensively in his films. Stereotypical representations of a hyper-masculine penetrating top partner and a feminine bottom partner also abound. Often, the characters are depicted in shameful gestures or in attempts to conceal themselves by using costumes or masks. As Ada Ackerman argues, in Eisenstein’s depiction of transvestism and disguise we find not only an exploration of queerness, but also metaphors for the strategy of protecting oneself in the totalitarian and homophobic society of Stalinist Russia.¹⁹ Furthermore, transvestism as well as bisexuality were thought of conduits towards a return to the pre-logic primary state that interested him so much.²⁰ As Masha Salazkina puts it, “identity, both gender and sexual, is just a matter of disguise, of clothing—and all of this is changing and interchangeable and acts as a manifestation of the same, of what Eisenstein in 1933 calls “plasmatic characteristics of primordial matter.”²¹

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Eisenstein was never able to see nor edit his Mexican footage. Propelled by an intense creative period, Eisenstein filmed over 200,000 feet of film rushes, equaling to a running time of nearly forty hours of footage. The project became overly costly and deadlines were continuously postponed, frustrating the Sinclair’s, who were also growing uncertain about the content of the film. Many arguments between them ensued, to the point that Sinclair sent letters of complaint to several Soviet officials about Eisenstein’s queer behaviour and his obscene drawings, which prompted a telegraphed response from Stalin accusing Eisenstein of being a deserter and urging his return. The Sinclair’s eventually turned off the tap, and after fourteen months in Mexico, Eisenstein left his film unfinished and unedited, and was back in Russia by May of 1932. Since then, the footage has been edited in several film versions, following different interpretations and visions that cannot be considered completely faithful to what Eisenstein intended.

Back in Moscow he had trouble with the Soviet authorities due to the accusations of his queerness and his sex drawings. Under Stalin, homosexuality in the USSR had become a crime against the state, with punishments of up to five years of imprisonment in labor camps.

As a result, many gay men married women, just like Eisenstein did in 1934. She was her beloved long-time secretary and confidant Pera Atasheva. Eisenstein continued drawing until his death, yet under very different conditions. Now forcibly working for the Soviet Union, constantly facing censorship, and in a conservative society that was very belligerent towards queer identities, drawing was an both an escape and a look back to the queer life he had witnessed in Europe and the United States and the sexual freedom he had enjoyed in Mexico.

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“Je ne fais pas du cinéma—je fais de Mexique et du moi”
(I am not making cinema—I am making Mexico and myself) ²²

“The feeling is that I don’t see how and when I draw—“it flows.” It is drawing not with your eyesight but with your being. You reproduce the attitude. You are focused on it. The hand follows automatically. I have been transformed.” ²³

Eisenstein’s sex drawings are an intimate and fascinating means to enrich our understanding of his artistic and philosophical legacy. Just like montage in his films, in them we observe the process of decomposing and amalgamating as a way of worlding, in which his search for introspection is inextricable to his quest for objecting linear epistemic constructions that compartmentalise and exclude instead of embracing a cosmic oneness to which we truly belong. Eisenstein’s goal was to take apart and reconstruct social and cultural relations through images, just like the intellectual queer endeavour is to unlearn and recompose again and again. As José Esteban Muñoz wrote, “Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing. [...] Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.”²⁴ Against all odds, Eisenstein spent his life insisting on the potentiality of another self within another world, ever-inquiring with that obstinately queer duality of longing and *joie de vivre*. Gifted with his legacy and to his honour we remain in the pursuit of an ecstatic life.

Sergi Rusca
Curator

This exhibition has been made in cooperation with Stephenson art, London.

Stephenson art

Footnotes

- ¹ Jean-Claude Marcadé, “Los dibujos secretos de Su Majestad Eisenstein”, in Serguéi Eisenstein, *Dibujos eróticos*, edited by Maria Haltunen, Alias: México City, 2021, page 98.
- ² Jean Cocteau, “Letter to Sergei Eisenstein”, 1930. Eisenstein Archive, RGALI, Moscow, 1923-1-1867.
- ³ Marie Rebecchi, “The Unlimited Montage. Eisenstein’s Anthropological Gaze”, in *Sergei Eisenstein and the Anthropology of Rhythm*, eds. Marie Rebecchi and Elena Vogman, Rome: NERO, 2017, page 21.
- ⁴ Masha Salazkina, *In Excess. Sergei Eisenstein’s Mexico*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009, pp. 129-130.
- ⁵ Ada Ackerman, “Carnavalesque Carnality: The Queer Potential of Sergei Eisenstein’s Homoerotic Drawings”, in *Queer(ing) Russian Art. Realism, Revolution, Performance*. Academic Studies Press: Brookline, 2023. Page 164.
- ⁶ Oksana Bulgakowa, *Sergei Eisenstein. A Biography*, Berlin: Potemkin Press, 2001. Pp. 41-43.
- ⁷ Ackerman, 165.
- ⁸ Idem.
- ⁹ Sergei Eisenstein, writings from Merida, Yucatán, March 1931 — Hacienda Tetlapayac, August 1931, in Rebecchi and Vogman, p. 49.
- ¹⁰ Joan Neuberger, “Strange circus: Eisenstein’s sex drawings”, in *Studies in Russian & Soviet Cinema*, volume 6, number 1, 2012. Page 18.
- ¹¹ Ibidem, 13.
- ¹² Ibidem, 18.
- ¹³ Marcadé, 104.
- ¹⁴ Neuberger, pp 14-15.
- ¹⁵ Sergei Eisenstein, writings from Merida, Yucatán, March 1931 — Hacienda Tetlapayac, August 1931, in Rebecchi and Vogman, p. 48.
- ¹⁶ Rebecchi and Vogman, 27.
- ¹⁷ Salazkina, 91.
- ¹⁸ Ibidem, 99.
- ¹⁹ Ackerman, 172.
- ²⁰ Salazkina, 126.
- ²¹ Ibidem, 128.
- ²² Sergei Eisenstein, writings from Merida, Yucatán, March 1931 — Hacienda Tetlapayac, August 1931, in Rebecchi and Vogman, p. 56.
- ²³ Ibidem, p. 60.
- ²⁴ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia. The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York: New York University Press, 2009, p. 1.