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Overcoming the Threshold: Bakhtin, Eisenstein, and the Cinema of German Expressionism

... everything was happening the way it usually happens in dreams when you leap over space and time, over all laws of life and reason, and only pause where your heart's desire bids you pause.
(Dostoevsky, "The Dream of a Ridiculous Man")

I. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

In the finale of his play *Ash Wednesday* (1988), Lars Kleberg presents Sergei Eisenstein discussing his intention to screen Dostoevsky's "A Meek One" with Mikhail Bakhtin. In a typically postmodernist way, Kleberg contextualizes the two cult figures of Soviet culture into an imaginary friendly conversation under the starry cupola of the Moscow planetarium not long before Easter of 1940. Referring to Dostoevsky's novella, Kleberg's Eisenstein sees in Bakhtin the perfect performer of the main part. For him, Bakhtin has managed, as much as possible, to master the technique of the Dostoevskian interior monologue and to reach the borderline of its conscious manifestation. Bakhtin, as well as Dostoevsky, "felt the magic in the labyrinths of inner speech, but stopped at the threshold" (Kleberg 240).¹

According to Kleberg's Eisenstein, verbal expression can never overcome this threshold. The transgression can best be accomplished in the visual/cinematic medium. Eisenstein claims,

The language of cinema, much more than the language of literature, possesses the potential to penetrate into the undifferentiated, prelogical depth of cognition, where all is one and one is all, where the mysterious unity has not yet been destroyed. There is unity between sign and object, between reason and sense, between pain and pleasure, between male and female, between good and evil.... (Kleberg 240-41)

1 Translations from Russian, when not otherwise indicated, are mine.

Such an apology of the undifferentiated united whole is reminiscent of Bakhtin's celebrated theorizing of popular culture and the adjacent notion of carnival. In a similar, "prelogical" manner, carnival allows for total, if temporary, obliteration of limits and constraints, and is based on the continuous transvestite reversal of high and low, top and bottom, king and fool.

At the present stage of scholarly endeavours, the application of the Bakhtinian concepts of carnival, dialogism/Other, and unfinalizability to the theory and practice of cinema and to cultural studies in general, has been most productive (cf. Stam). At the same time, the fourth basic concept in Bakhtin's overall theoretical legacy — the chronotope — is rarely applied to the theory of film. Usually it is regarded as a purely narratological device, restricted by the novelistic genre, and hence hardly applicable within the more general framework of cultural studies.²

What is not assessed, is the fact that by developing his theory of the chronotope, and the subsequent taxonomization of concrete novelistic chronotopes, Bakhtin in reality pushes the visual potential of the verbal medium to its limits. He manages to construct an almost discourse-independent spatio-temporal coordinate system for the different kinds of novelistic worlds, which emerges with the first mentioning of the setting, at the very beginning of the actual textual narration, and before its completion. From this perspective, he provides the fictional world of the novel with a high degree of visibility which brings it akin to the cinematic medium. In this context, Bakhtin's attempts to display the visual aspect of the verbal medium can be viewed in parallel with Eisenstein's consistent efforts to give a verbal formulation to his cinematic experiments.

Below, I will try to establish common points of reference between the development of the notion of chronotope in Bakhtin and the evolution of Eisenstein's theory of film. Taking into account the concrete historical situation in the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s, I will support my discussion with instances from the cinema of German Expressionism whose development is set against a socio-political background with strikingly similar elements.

II. BAKHTIN'S CHRONOTOPE

2.1. In his theory of narrative Bakhtin focuses primarily on *seeing the world*. Already in his first work dedicated to poetics, "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity" (1920-23), he establishes the basic category of his approach to the verbal text — *artistic contemplation* (1990, 24). His description of the artistic worlds in verbal narrative — in particular, in Dostoevsky and Rabelais — is

entirely subordinated to the degree of outward visualization which each of these artistic universes manifests. In "Author and Hero," Bakhtin introduces the three principal components which structure novelistic discourse: character, time, and space. The essence of the Bakhtinian chronotope consists in the indivisible combination of the latter two.

Bakhtin's investigations of the notion of chronotope find their concentrated treatment in his book-length article "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel" (1937-38, 1973). Bakhtin borrows the basic term *chronotope* from the natural sciences and applies it to literary theory to express the inseparability between three-dimensional space and time as its fourth dimension. Bakhtin defines the chronotope as "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature," and understands it as "a formally constitutive category of literature" (1981, 84).

An in-depth analysis of the chronotope reveals its complex essence. On the level of the narrative, it is an obligatory technical device, necessary for the anchoring of the system of characters and the plotline into a definite physical environment characterized by particular spatial (geographical, topographical, etc.) and temporal (historical, chronological, etc.) parameters. On the level of artistic impression, it becomes a global term for a certain visual model, which, when evoked, momentarily emerges as a fully shaped, finalized whole, irrespective of the concrete details constructed during the particular narration. The narration itself may only elaborate the ready model of a concrete chronotope. Moreover, the process of narration is constrained by the requirements underlying this initial chronotope. In a certain sense, the visual disposition precedes and guides the verbal exposition.

Bakhtin's scholarly research represents his striving to conjoin the unconjoinable: he justifies the possibility to apply a common terminology to two traditionally separate and juxtaposed types of art. His approach to the issue may be viewed as a struggle against the line set with Lessing's *Laokoön*, which aims at the segregation between spatial and temporal forms of art (cf. Bakhtin 1981, 251). Bakhtin writes:

The external image of the hero and his world, expressed in words — regardless of whether it is visualized ... or whether it is experienced only in emotional-volitional terms — has the significance of a consummating form, that is, the external image is not only "expressive," but is "impressive" artistically as well. All of the proportions we have advanced above are applicable here as well — the verbal portrait is subject to them just as much as the pictorial portrait. (1990, 95-96)

The summary of these ideas is contained in Bakhtin's insistence that the "plastic-pictorial moment" (95) must be recognized as a constitutive element of verbal creation.

2 For example, Morson and Emerson in their fundamental and exhaustive study on Bakhtin leave the chronotope out of the global Bakhtinian concepts (15-62) and place it in the section dedicated to particular theories of the novel (366-432).

2.2. While verbal activity cannot create physically tangible volumetric forms *per se*, the aesthetic object resulting from a particular aesthetic *vision*, and constructed through verbal means, possesses an inner artistic volumetric form. In the 1920s and 1930s, Bakhtin dedicates his efforts to the description and taxonomization of the different kinds of volumetric forms in narrative (cf. Vlasov). His interest in the origins and development of the novel is dictated by his understanding of the novel as the quintessential genre of the realistic method and the most adequate form for the establishment of an "iconic" relationship between representation and actuality, between art and ideology.

Discourse in the novel — and prosaic discourse, in general — is characterized by its double-voicedness and hence, ambivalence (Bakhtin 1981, 301-31). In this sense, prosaic discourse most fully corresponds to the dialectic relationship between the inner significance of spatial forms and its visual outward spatial presentation. The two aspects both complement each other and are juxtaposed to each other. According to Bakhtin, external form once visualized, becomes frozen and finalized; inner form, on the other hand, can never be finalized, and hence it is interpretative in essence (1990, 94-95). The dichotomy which Bakhtin sees in space allows for the symbolic utilization and ideological interpretation of spatial forms.

The nature of the chronotope which Bakhtin presents as the constitutive element of prosaic discourse, places the genre of the novel most closely to the cinematic medium. Chronotope in the novel corresponds to the spatio-temporal setting in film. The literary examples, which Bakhtin employs to illustrate his catalogue of chronotopes in "The Forms of Time," display anchoring in similar spatial settings, irrespective of their historical contexts. Bakhtin distinguishes such chronotopes as the chronotope of the *road*, the chronotope of the *castle*, the chronotope of *parlours and salons*, the chronotope of the *provincial town*, the chronotope of the *public square* with its variant of the chronotope of the *market-place*, and the chronotope of the *threshold* (1981, 132, 243-50).

Bakhtin underlines that all these chronotopes bear a "representational importance" (250). It is only by means of the chronotope that the receiver can be informed of the place and time of the events represented in the artistic text. Bakhtin writes:

It is precisely the chronotope that provides the ground essential for the showing-forth, the representability of events. And this is so thanks precisely to the special increase in density and concreteness of time markers — the time of human life, of historical time — that occurs within well-delineated spatial areas. It is this that makes it possible to structure a representation of events in the chronotope (around the chronotope). (250)

The chronotope is a finite, visible pattern which possesses a number of obligatory details connected to particular images defining the specificity of the world presented in it. The catalogue of chronotopes which Bakhtin highlights

transforms them into autonomous "dictionary-type" entries which function independently and beyond the context of a particular artistic work. Each chronotope represents a closed organic whole where a certain ideological/conceptual meaning is bound to its constituent visual/spatial form.

The harmonious and self-sufficient nature of each chronotope makes it an ideal sense-generating unit within the epistemological system of the semiotics of art. The nature of the non-contextualized, autonomous chronotope *a priori* establishes the general rules and logic of plot development before its unfolding in the text, and partially satisfies the receivers' anticipations prior to their exposure to the particular work.³ Each chronotope "tunes in" the receivers to an *adequate* perception and interpretation of the subsequent flow of narrated events. As Bakhtin claims, "every entry into the sphere of meanings is accomplished *only* through the gates of the chronotope" (258; my italics).

III. EISENSTEIN'S THEORY IN A BAKHTINIAN CONTEXT

3.1. The parallel between Bakhtin and Eisenstein can be drawn along the lines of their similar movement from dialogical conflict towards a harmonious organic whole. In Bakhtin, the transition can be traced from Dostoevsky's total dialogism (second half of the 1920s) to Rabelais's and Goethe's organicity (late 1930s — early 1940s). With regard to Eisenstein, a similar shift is realized when he moves from the absolutization of the notion of montage as a juxtaposition of shots (end of the 1920s) to the creation of meaning through the building of an organically integrated entirety (late 1930s — 1940s) (cf. Bordwell 1975).

In the early Eisenstein, the conflict between consecutive shots in particular, and between two juxtaposed notions in general, is exploited to its limits. In 1929 — the same year when Bakhtin publishes his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Art* — Eisenstein declares, "Art cannot exist without conflict" (1964-71, 2: 40). In parallel with Bakhtin, who at the end of the 1920s absolutizes the dialogical essence of Dostoevsky's artistic narrative technique, Eisenstein proclaims montage — which he defines as the clash between two adjacent shots (290) — to be the basis of cinematic narration. The ideal of montage in the early Eisenstein is based on the notion of freedom, of the unrestricted choice of miscellaneous shots which are glued together in counterposition to each other. In his "The Montage of Attractions" (1923), he defends the possibility of the freedom of choice in the selection of the shots for cinematic montage. He defines his principal artistic method as "a free montage with arbitrarily chosen independent (of both the

3 In Bakhtin's context, an adjacent device for the accomplishment of such *a priori* experience, is the employment of the ideologies and the poetics of authors from radically different historical and/or geographical chronotopes. Their "involvement" in the immediate ideological context allows the contemporaries "to experience experience *before* they had actually experienced it" (Deltcheva and Vlasov 1994, 578; italics in the original).

particular composition and any thematic connection with the actors) effects (attractions), but with the precise aim of a specific final thematic effect" (1988, 35; Eisenstein's italics). Essentially, the theoretical postulates of the early Eisenstein can be reduced to a *simple* juxtaposition of two material details whose aim is to express an organically complete idea of a different quality (1964-71, 2: 286).

As a next stage in the evolution of "simple dialogism," both Bakhtin and Eisenstein develop the notion of polyphony (cf. Bordwell 1993, 197). While Bakhtin theorizes on the specificity of Dostoevsky's polyphonic novel, Eisenstein introduces his concept of *polyphonic montage*. In "Vertical Montage" (1940), he defines it as "the *simultaneous movement* of a number of motifs [which] advances through a succession of sequences, each motif having its own rate of compositional progression, while being at the same time inseparable from the overall compositional progression as a whole" (1991, 330; Eisenstein's italics). In this context, both Bakhtin and Eisenstein are joined by their common approach to the events depicted from the point of view of synchronicity. Polyphony broadens the borders of opposition from mere binary opposition to a multiplicity of oppositions. This expansion allows for further volumetrization of the narrative space.

3.2. Bakhtin consistently perpetrates the idea of the ideologization of form. In his gradual evolution as a theoretician and practitioner of cinema, Eisenstein, in turn, reaches similar conclusions. In his programmatic "Montage 1938," Eisenstein rejects his earlier view about the generation of new meaning by the interaction of any two adjacent shots as purely formalistic. Instead, he introduces the idea of the organic, natural birth of the artistic image by generating a nuclear whole. Eisenstein writes that "the desired image is not something *ready-made* but *has to arise or to be born from something else*" (1991, 309; Eisenstein's italics).

Eisenstein's artistic shift is accomplished by the extension of the artistic image from a mere juxtaposition of two adjacent shots to an organic combination of sequences of shots. As Ivanov points out, in Eisenstein we observe the evolution from the "montagic" understanding of shots to the "plastic," i.e., the more volumetric, one (154). This obvious shift from the linear juxtaposition of two adjacent shots to the creation of a more global meaning-generating unit allows Ivanov to claim that "Eisenstein's theory of the image presupposes not only the ability to isolate a concrete representation (the signifier in a semiotic context) from an abstract generalization underlying it (the signified in a semiotic context), but also the ability to isolate a represented idea from a concrete given representation" (158).

For Eisenstein, the modification of the receivers' perception plays a crucial role in this complex process. By perpetual intellectual training in the course of cultural practices, the receivers must acquire the ability concurrently to perceive immediate sense data and to actualize concepts purely by rational inferencing. In

other words, the receivers must be able to discriminate a mere sign-event from the complexity of a sign-type/sign-token dichotomy (cf. Ivanov 158). In the context of Eisenstein's theory of the image, there must be sufficient differentiation between the iconic quality of the sign-event — an isolated shot in film or a particular description in the verbal narrative — and the generalized conceptualization of the sign-token by means of the catalogue of invariants, sign-types, which *a priori* exists in the receivers' mentality/memory, and precedes the receivers' apprehension of the text. The pre-existing knowledge of the sign-types serves as a device which provides "the overall perception of a sequence as a whole [sign-token]" (Eisenstein 1991, 332). Eisenstein's preference for the employment of the intellectually mediated complex sign (token plus type) in the filmic text must be considered in opposition to other experiments with montage (e.g., Lev Kuleshov's extensive exploitation of sensually-based sign-events as a mere technical device). When referred to the notion of space and spatial forms, Eisenstein's technique can be correlated to the notion of the chronotope, which for Bakhtin presents a complex entity consisting of ready-constructed dictionary-type entries and their concrete authorial implementation in a given literary text.

3.3. One can claim that Bakhtin's study of the chronotope in fact conceptualizes a principally new type of artistic mentality. Bakhtin substitutes thinking through representative images by thinking through conceptual images. By a representative image, I mean the artistic construct (based on the sign-event) whose ideological significance, if it exists at all, is at least ambiguous and may undergo semantic shifts in accordance with the context it is employed in. The attachment of symbolic/conceptual meaning to this kind of image can be considered as an enrichment of its semantic space. This enrichment is completed by the receiver of the artistic message, but not by the sender. The phenomenon is manifested when on the level of interpretation the receiver attributes a particular symbolic significance to the spatial parameters, while on the level of narration he/she encounters a symbolically neutral description. Following this logic, it is hardly legitimate to look for a special symbolic significance in the urban landscapes depicted by writers such as Balzac and Tolstoy.

A conceptual image (based on the sign-type/sign-token dichotomy), conversely, presupposes a higher degree of symbolicity which, in turn, provides its relative autonomy from the immediate context. The basic unity of the visual image and the symbolic meaning attached to it allows the conceptual image to function as a contextually-independent meaning-generating unit. For example, in the Gothic novel and in Kafka, and in the picaresque novel and road movies, the images of the castle and of the road, respectively, evoke analogous connotations in different artistic contexts. Thus, the thinking by means of chronotopes is achieved through the establishment of a connection between the variant of the image used in the concrete (con)text (the token) and its "dictionary" conceptual

invariant (the type). The representative image, on the contrary, remains locked in the particular situational context and cannot transgress the boundary to become a conceptual invariant.

The phenomenon described above can be defined as *chronotopic mentality*. It fully corresponds to the common goal which both Bakhtin and Eisenstein pursue: specifically, the ideologization of form. The very essence of the process of ideologization of form requires that a particular visual image be conjoined with a specific ideological concept by means of a conventional contract between sender and receiver. The correspondence between image and concept is achieved on an extralinguistic level, only by means of visual effects — hence, it possesses a higher degree of universal signification. Chronotopic mentality is a result of a publicly shared convention which emerges in the process of evolution of artistic and ideological forms. At a certain point this evolution reaches its finite limit, and the chronotopic image becomes totally petrified in terms of development, and remains entirely tied up with the respective conceptual core. As Eisenstein claims in his "Vertical Montage,"

we do not submit ourselves to any "immanent laws" of absolute "connotations" and relationships between colours and sounds, or to any "absolute" correspondences between them and specific emotions, but ... we prescribe to colours and sounds the task of serving the purposes and emotions that we find necessary. (1991, 370)

3.4. The crucial question here consists in the *choice* of the object named/demonstrated. Eisenstein calls this choice "the selection of the stimulants" (1988, 65). Significantly, for Eisenstein selection is his second priority which is subordinated to his first priority — "the determination of the purpose of the film" (65). This approach is instigated by his belief that "the object or phenomenon, besides its immediate existence, possesses a certain symbolic significance" (1964-71, 1: 90).⁴ Eisenstein establishes this hierarchy as early as 1923 in his programmatic article "The Method of Making a Worker's Film."⁵

Eisenstein theorizes on the basis of his experiences as a film director. In cinematic practice, the director is always confronted with the problem how to

4 Compare this statement with the logic of Eisenstein's subsequent argumentation in relation to the symbolic significance of spatial forms in *Ivan the Terrible*: "The fan of vertical clouds around Ivan the Terrible in the Kazan siege episode is least of all the representation of a meteorological phenomenon — it is above all the image of imperial grandeur; the gigantic twisted silhouette of the astrolabe over the head of the Moscow tsar is least of all treated as a simple light effect — but it automatically, by means of its intersecting circles, reminds of a cardiogram [sic] featuring the ways of thought of the mediating politician" (1964-71, 1: 91).

5 For my further discussion, it is worth mentioning that in this two-page article, of the two instances Eisenstein employs as reference points for his theoretical pursuits, one is Wiene's *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* as an example of a politically incorrect ideological concept (one should not forget the clearly Marxist spirit of the article).

create a global ideological concept by implementing the concrete spatial/visual material. In this context, the idea of chronotope corresponds to the notion of *generalized image* employed by Eisenstein in his theoretical endeavours. In "Montage" (Chapter "Yermolova"; 1937) Eisenstein writes,

Here a contradiction seems to arise: the highest stage — the generalised image — seems in visual terms to coincide with the most primitive type of synthesising perception. But this is only an apparent contradiction.... The fact is that generalisation is a *true synthesis*, i.e. simultaneously a synthesising (immediate) and a differential (mediated) perception of the event (and a perception *about* the event). (1991, 97; Eisenstein's italics)

Eisenstein elaborates on the problem how to produce global ideological meanings by means of "realistic" images which possess an effective visual quality. In this case, the verbal and visual practices in fact coincide — the difference which results from the qualitative distinction of the two media resides in the fact that in the verbal text the object is named/described while in the visual it is shown/exhibited. Since the catalogue of global concepts reflected in art is finite and can be reduced to the list of basic patterns of human thought and feeling, the corresponding visual forms can also be taxonomized and registered in a conventional artistic inventory. An indicator of the value of a particular item in this inventory is the degree to which the given image is utilized and ideologized in different historical and cultural environments. This phenomenon can be illustrated with a notable example from the cinema of German Expressionism.

IV. THE CHRONOTOPE OF THE THRESHOLD IN GERMAN EXPRESSIONISM

4.1. Within the time frame of the 1920s and 1930s Bakhtin's scholarship, Eisenstein's endeavours, and German cinema demonstrate a similar trend in their development, despite their relative independence from one another. In all three cases, the total subordination of the selection of stimulants to a particular ideological concept is established. The concrete ideological perspective through which the sequence of narrated events is presented, dictates the particular visual images in which they are reflected in the idiosyncratic discourses of the scholar or of the film director.

In the context of the selection of stimulants, one can trace the transition in imagery in Bakhtin's and Eisenstein's theories. In Bakhtin, the transition is objectified by the radical shift from the chronotope of the threshold in Dostoevsky to the chronotope of the marketplace in Rabelais. In parallel, the change in Eisenstein is effected from the early notion of montage, the idea of "scissors and glue" (Vlasov and Suzuki) to the later concept of ideological and image-based organicity. In this framework, Eisenstein's idea of organicity fully corresponds to Bakhtin's fascination with the Rabelaisian grotesque body as the

perfect "synthesizer" of form and content with its totally public nature (Bakhtin 1968, especially Chapters 5 and 6).

The transition from the chronotope of the threshold to the chronotope of the marketplace does not represent merely the transition from the closed confined atmosphere of labyrinthine passages, staircases, and mysterious doorways to the vast expanse of the open public space. It is simultaneously the resolution of the crisis inherently present in the chronotope of the threshold. The dilemma is resolved by overcoming the threshold, i.e., in favour of a compromising, accommodating personal position artistically expressed through the chronotope of the marketplace: one can rebel, fight, undergo transformations, etc., only in so far as they are limited by the spatial parameters of the foreground and by the ideological restrictions of the notion of the carnivalesque.

The obsessive fascination with staircases/thresholds in Dostoevsky which Bakhtin emphasizes, reflects the scholar's ideological searching, in the same way as the Odessa steps sequence in *The Battleship Potemkin* (1925) justifies Eisenstein's political quests of the period. Simultaneously, the short life of German Expressionism and its subsequent dissemination in Hollywood productions (F.W. Murnau, Fritz Lang), and the official Nazi movies of the late 1930s (Thea von Harbou, G.W. Pabst) reflect similar processes in fairly similar political circumstances. Unlike Bakhtin and Eisenstein, however, in extratextual reality, the representatives of German Expressionism were objectively faced with more choices — they could opt for the grandiose "public square" of Nuremberg and Berlin (Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph des Willens* [1936] and *Olympiad* [1938]) or the tinseltown "marketplace" of Beverly Hills. In this context, the title of Lang's second Hollywood production — *You Live Only Once* (1937) — sounds at least ambiguous.

4.2. During the years when Bakhtin "theorizes" Dostoevsky's world, the best representatives of German Expressionist cinema "materialize" it.⁶ In his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Art* and in "Forms of Time," Bakhtin presents a taxonomic classification of the different types of spaces in Dostoevsky's novels. The starting point of Bakhtin's discussion is the observation that the organization of the spatial forms in Dostoevsky's novels is conditioned by the personal ideologies of the main characters, and by the author's total disinterestedness in a verisimilar presentation of the exterior. Dostoevsky concentrates on the personal ideological and ethical positions of his characters revealed through innumerable dialogues. Realistic descriptions of interiors and landscapes against which the

6 In passing, it is worth mentioning that Bakhtin establishes the connection between the verbal depiction of spatial forms in narrative and the author's "actual visible experience" (1986, 27; Bakhtin's italics) exactly in a "German" context — in his *The Bildungsroman and Its Significance in the History of Realism* (1936-38) — discussing Goethe's non-fictional prose.

dialogues are set are very rarely provided. Even when the spatial parameters of the actions are introduced, they are mentioned only at the beginning of a conversation, and subsequently, are totally ignored in the course of it. According to Bakhtin,

Dostoevsky involves us in the world of the hero, and we do not see the hero from outside.... That is why Dostoevsky's heroes on stage produce an entirely different impression from the one they produce when we are reading. It is in principle impossible to represent the specificity of Dostoevsky's world on stage.... There is no independent and neutral place for us: an objective seeing of the hero is impossible. That is why the footlights destroy a proper apprehension of Dostoevsky's works. Their theatrical effect is — a dark stage with voices, and nothing more. (1990, 236-37)

Thus, without adhering to the poetics of Expressionism, Bakhtin practically describes Dostoevsky's "expressionist" approach to the setting which is conditioned by the subjectivized world vision of his protagonists.

In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1963) — the revised version of *Problems of Dostoevsky's Art* — Bakhtin describes Dostoevsky's universe as "the artistically organized coexistence and interaction of spiritual diversity, not stages in the evolution of a unified spirit" (1984, 31). In this world, like in the Expressionist world, the entities of actual reality are devoid of their material essence, but serve as a source of values for the hero and his self-consciousness. Along with his personal attributes, they become objects of "the hero's own introspection" (48). In other words, space and spatial forms are a constitutive part of the target of the hero's point of view. The totality of space in Dostoevsky emerges as a convergence of the different fields of vision possessed by the different participants in the polyphonic interaction. Such a multi-layered perspectival spatiality accounts for the distorted universe of German Expressionist films, presented through the focalization of characters with a deformed mentality.

4.3. In juxtaposing Dostoevsky's polyphonic novel to other generic forms, Bakhtin draws a distinct borderline between two types of worlds. In the biographical novel, the objective world which surrounds the hero and the hero himself constitute an organic whole; they both "must be made of one piece" (1981, 101). In Dostoevsky's works, the relations between the world and the never-finalized character are realized on a different plane. Since Dostoevsky altogether disregards historical/biographical time and makes use only of crisis time, the predominant spatial forms in his novels can be treated as the instigators of this type of time whose origins are found in the ancient Menippea. Bakhtin defines the latter as the basic source of the emergence of the poetics of universal polyphony. The Menippea, being a "universal genre of ultimate questions" (1984, 146), ignores the precise spatio-temporal disposition of its actions and transposes them "throughout the world and for all eternity" (147). It is characterized by an

organicity of a different nature: "the organic combination ... of the free fantastic, the symbolic, at times even a mystical-religious element with an extreme and ... crude *slum naturalism*" (115; Bakhtin's italics).

It is characteristic of Dostoevsky to make his heroes solve ultimate universal questions in "low" places. In fact, there are only two general topoi which fully correspond to the ideological and emotional states of Dostoevsky's characters: first, the *public square* and its variant of the *marketplace* (e.g., in Rabelais's *Gargantua et Pantagruel*) as the place of the repentance/confession, as well as the zone of the catastrophe, the scandal, the row, and the carnival, and second, the *threshold* as the point where the crisis and the climactic event take place. The chronotope of the public square/marketplace corresponds in many respects to the locus of the fairground — a favourite setting of many Expressionist films. This correspondence is revealed in the carnivalesque essence of the fairground where the metamorphosis of rogues into kings and travelling showmen into evil masterminds is manifested. Similarly, the inherently climactic significance of the threshold is felt and exploited by the Expressionist *cinéastes*, who locate their characters in this locus specifically at times of crucial plot developments or deep soul searching.

The principle of the chronotope of the threshold consists in the choice of a particular area which can be determined as the place of conjoining of two different spaces — entrances, doorways, corridors, staircases, etc. The chronotope in general incorporates "thresholds" of diverse magnitudes. In *Crime and Punishment*, Bakhtin points out two instances of the threshold essence: the stairway as the link between the narrow, confined, private domains at the top, and the extensive, public city landscapes at the bottom, and the city of St. Petersburg in its entirety as standing on the threshold, "on the borderline between existence and nonexistence, reality and phantasmagoria, always on the verge of dissipating like the fog and vanishing" (167). Dostoevsky's obsession with staircases and entrances, which serve as the typical topoi for mental crises and psychological breakdowns, underlies Morson's and Emerson's definition of Dostoevsky as "the master of the threshold dialogue outside of time" (Morson and Emerson 418).

4.4. German Expressionism provides a parallel adequate visualization of the themes, motifs, and devices which Dostoevsky employs in literature. As a movement in the history of cinema, it is credited mainly for its avant-garde experimentation with formal means and its technical inventiveness. The representatives of the movement succeed in creating a unique cinematic world, structured in a specific way to reflect the irrational and chaotic states of the hidden side of human beings. As Ellis points out, "The expressionist tendency offered visual design that was striking in its own right (*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*) and large in scale (*The Golem*) as well as being expressive of moods and subjective states"

(106). The settings in Expressionist films acquire the same degree of symbolic significance as the actions of the characters functioning in them.

The major tendency in setting/*décor* design in Expressionist films is oriented towards the intentional creation of an artificial, non-realistic world. It is meant not to represent extratextual reality based on the principle of verisimilitude, but rather to create an alternative world which objectifies the aberrations of the repressed human subconsciousness. Following the principle that "films must be drawings brought to life" (Hermann Warm, qtd. in Manvell and Fraenkel 17), the Expressionists devise and produce entirely artificial sets and generally rely on painted backdrops, specially drawn for the films. Natural landscapes are rarely used, and when they are, their visual presentation is distorted, stylized, and artificialized. The Expressionist *Weltanschauung* inspires a wide range of possible artificial settings from the confined spaces of fairground tents (Robert Wiene's *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* [1919]) and wax-figure museums (Paul Leni's *Wachsfigurenkabinett* [1924]), to entire cities (Paul Wegener's and Carl Boese's *Der Golem* [1920], Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* [1926]).

The theatrical quality of the Expressionist settings is enriched by experimentation with light and dark, stark contrasts between black and white, and the interplay of shadows and mirrors. The irrational states of the human soul are exteriorized through the global destruction of natural perspectives and their replacement by distorted geometrical polygons. In this respect, the focus is concentrated on the peculiar disposition of the setting; in particular the arrangement of vertical and horizontal planes and the organization of the shot along the diagonal axis.

4.5. One of the primary factors which determines the Expressionist spatial organization is defined by Lotte Eisner as "the obsession with corridors and staircases" (119). The action in a great number of sequences and episodes in Expressionist films takes place in corridors, at entrances, on stairways. This specific spatial organization is coupled with the use of a static camera⁷ which results in a powerful artistic rendition of one of the main Expressionist themes — the destiny of the little and helpless man in a hostile world where he is relentlessly pursued by the forces of rational and irrational evil, and from which he cannot escape. A celebrated example in which this type of spatial organization is exploited, both literally and symbolically, is the long but futile flight of the lovers Vanina (Asta Nielsen) and Octavio (Paul Wegener) through endless winding corridors in Arthur von Gerlach's *Vanina* (1922). According to Manvell and Fraenkel, the labyrinths here prolong the agony of the lovers and "symbolize the ultimate impossibility of escape" (28). Another anthology piece is the shot

7 Murnau's films, primarily *Der letzte Mann* (1924), are a notable exception. In them he introduces and develops the concept of the subjective camera.

from Lang's classic presenting Dr. Mabuse (Rudolph Klein-Rogge) walking down an enormous poorly-lit staircase with a chandelier in his hand. The fullness of the scene is emphasized by the *chiaroscuro* and the masterful effects of the light cast from the candles and the white shirt, starkly contrasting the macabre darkness of the interiors. The luminous phallic tower, girdled by winding stairs, looms large over the dark sleeping city in Pabst's *Geheimnisse einer Seele* (1926). Sometimes, the image of the staircase can become the central plot structuring element of the whole film — such is the case of Leni's *Hinter-treppe* (1921).

The distorted quality of the settings in Expressionist films define the unnatural, often startling, shapes of the stairways. For example, the spiral staircases in Wegener's and Boese's *Der Golem* and Leni's *Das Wachsfigurenkabinett* are presented as winding passages leading to mysterious spaces. In these films, the image of the staircase serves not as a mere architectural detail, but as an independent symbol of the unfathomable ways of the human soul. The blending between the internal significance and external functions of the image are visualized in Pabst's *Die Büchse der Pandora* (1928) where the heroine Lulu (Louise Brooks) is presented on the staircase haunted by visions of her victims' ghosts and dragging Jack the Ripper (Gustav Diessl) "along with her towards their destiny" (Eisner 29).

Purely technically, thresholds, staircases, and corridors in Expressionist films possess a high degree of functionality: they can account for the characters' sudden appearances and disappearances which define the abrupt shifts in plot development. In the first episode of *Das Wachsfigurenkabinett*, the shapes of the arches and entrances anticipate the physical traits and the inner essence of the protagonist Haroun Al-Raschid (Emil Jannings). They are manifested in the soft rounded yielding arches and doorways constructing the setting. Unlike the farcical quality of the first story, in the Ivan the Terrible episode,⁸ the overall psychotic and mysterious atmosphere is strengthened by the extensive exploitation of confined low-ceiling rooms, dim and foggy corridors, and low, hardly recognizable doors. The squat archways demanding each entering and exiting character to stoop down, create a claustrophobic, oppressive feeling which matches the plot development revealing Ivan's own incapacity to overcome the confines of his deranged mentality. Ivan (Conrad Veidt) tosses in the prison of his own visions and cannot find an exit. Other famous shots which foreground the importance of thresholds depict the figure of Nosferatu (Max Schreck) standing frozen under an arch doorway (Murnau's *Nosferatu* [1922]), Greta Garbo as a young prostitute waiting at the entrance of the hotel in Pabst's *Die*

freudlose Gasse (1925), and the shot of the arch at the end of his *Die Büchse der Pandora*.

4.6. In the overall neurotic and irrational context of the world of German Expressionist cinema, the preference for Dostoevsky as a source of artistic inspiration is not accidental. As Barlow points out, "The Russian novelist had been something of an obsession with many expressionists, who were easily attracted to his depictions of alienated human beings and extreme states of emotional intensity, as well as his placing of passion above reason" (54). The recurrent themes and motifs in Dostoevsky's works, such as the *Doppelgänger*, the psychotic states of the human subconscious, the incompatibility of the extraordinary individual and society, etc., coincide with the Expressionists' ideological pursuits. At the dawn of the movement, in 1918, one of Dostoevsky's great novels, *The Brothers Karamazov*, was screened by Dimitri Buchowetzki and Carl Froelich; the principal roles were played by Emil Jannings and Werner Krauss. Five years later, Wiene, the creator of *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*, directed another of Dostoevsky's masterpieces, *Crime and Punishment*. Wiene's *Raskolnikov* (1923) concentrates the major poetical devices of Dostoevsky's unique artistic style and the accomplishments of German Expressionism. As Eisner observes, "this film contains certain shots in which sets and characters really seem to stem from Dostoevsky's universe and act upon each other through a sort of reciprocal hallucination" (27).

The "stylized settings reminiscent of *Caligari*" (Kracauer 109) in *Raskolnikov*, designed by Andrei Andreev, are constructed to reflect the protagonist's subjective perception of St. Petersburg. As in traditional Expressionist films, the city landscapes and the interiors are presented in unnatural, distorted shapes. The film is shot against an artificial background built to create "a purely ideal space, one in which the normal relationships between objects are broken down, and in which coordinates seem to dissolve and reassemble themselves in upsetting proportions and distortions that defy the laws of gravity" (Barlow 55). Raskolnikov's deranged state of mind is visually reinforced through uncanny angular forms and anomalous perspective: bent streetlights, trapezoidal windows, slanted walls, gigantic street numbers, intersecting beams of reflected light, etc. Special attention is paid to staircases and entrances. The gigantic image of the staircase in Raskolnikov's building is intentionally foregrounded and acquires a plot-independent significance. The image of the staircase becomes a space-organizing element of the sequence demonstrating Raskolnikov's hallucinatory state of mind. The superimposition of a multitude of fragmentary images of characters and details on the ever-pervading staircase reinforces the impression of dissolution, collapse, and ultimate despair. The staircase leads Raskolnikov (Gregori Khmara) to his "threshold" — to the door of the pawnbroker Alena Ivanovna (Elisaveta Skulskaia). The door separating Raskolnikov and his victim is presented at an

8 Leni's *Das Wachsfigurenkabinett* is considered to be one of the sources for Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible*. For a discussion of expressionist echoes in Eisenstein's film, see Delicheva and Vlasov 1996.

impossible angle and exteriorizes the magnitude and ugliness of the protagonist's choice which he makes crossing the threshold.

Wiene's conception of the spatial organization of his *Raskolnikov* fully coincides with Bakhtin's understanding of the chronotope of the threshold as generating psychological struggles and mental crises. Bakhtin's and Wiene's close readings of Dostoevsky's narrative present tangible examples of how a conceptual image can be extracted from the verbal text and how it can be reconstructed in theoretical discourse and cinematic practice.

4.7. The inclusion of Eisenstein's name in the semiosphere created by Dostoevsky's poetics, Bakhtin's theory, and the cinema of German Expressionism is hardly unexpected or artificial. The Expressionist movement was an object of continuous interest for Eisenstein. As it was already mentioned above, *Das Wachsfigurenkabinett* can be viewed as one of the sources of Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible* (1944, 1946).

Eisenstein's overall attitude to the cinema of German Expressionism is inconsistent and contradictory. On the one hand, one of his first contributions to cinema was his re-editing of Lang's *Dr. Mabuse der Spieler* (1922) in preparation of the film for Soviet release (Eisenstein 1964-71, 5: 551). He knew the prime examples of the movement such as Lang's *Der müde Tod* (1921), Murnau's *Nosferatu*, Pabst's *Geheimnisse einer Seele* (5: 135; cf. Barna 70-75). Eisenstein also recognized the innovative quality of Expressionist montage in *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*. He saw in it an artistic achievement which set a new tendency juxtaposed to the "naturalistic tendency in Western cinema" (Eisenstein 1988, 31).⁹

At the same time, in his 1942 article "Dickens, Griffith, and Film Today," Eisenstein writes:

Mysticism, decadence, dismal fantasy followed in the wake of the unsuccessful [German] revolution of 1923, and the screen was quick to reflect this mood.... Expressionism left barely a trace on our cinema.... Expressionism passed into the formative history of our cinema as a powerful factor — of repulsion. (1977, 202, 203)

These statements are the quintessence of Eisenstein's Marxist rejection of "Expressionist symbolism, hyperemotionality, and licentious abstractions" (1964-71, 4: 67) which can be extracted from his theoretical writings in the 1930s and 1940s. His formulations, however, are motivated by the constantly changing historical and political reality of the time or, metaphorically speaking, by the rules of the chronotope of the marketplace. The gap between theory and practice

is objectified when, having condemned the decadence of Expressionist values, in 1942 Eisenstein undertakes his epic portrayal of Ivan the Terrible, "which abounds in Expressionist echoes, both in terms of themes and technical devices" (Deltcheva and Vlasov 1996, 99; cf. Thompson 173-86, 194-202).¹⁰

During the same period, Eisenstein also experiences a strong attraction to the works of Dostoevsky. While shooting *Ivan the Terrible*, he voiced his plans to screen *The Brothers Karamazov* and to stage fragments from *The Idiot* (Bordwell 1993, 225). It is *Crime and Punishment*, however, which seems to correspond most closely to Eisenstein's artistic and theoretical pursuits. His overall apprehension of Dostoevsky is marked by the emphasis on Dostoevsky's non-naturalistic method of representation. In his *Nonindifferent Nature* (Chapter "Pathos," 1946-47), Eisenstein — like Bakhtin — refers Dostoevsky's poetics to the literature of Antiquity, specifically to Antique drama (1964-71, 3: 137). Significantly, he uses *Crime and Punishment* as the material for the implementation of his theory and practice of *mise-en-scène*. In his celebrated lectures at the State Institute for Cinema (VGIK, 1933-34), he thoroughly analyzes the spatial reconstruction of Dostoevsky's narrative on the screen, and its direct conjoining to the ideological level of the work. In the course of his discussion, he introduces his own understanding of the threshold essence of Dostoevsky's chronotope by revealing the structural significance of threshold areas, such as windows, doors, etc., for the disposition of dramatic tension (cf. Nizhny 93-139).

4.8. The establishment of the chronotope of the threshold as the principal chronotope defining Dostoevsky's universe by Bakhtin, the parallel obsession with staircases and corridors of the German Expressionists, and Eisenstein's complex vision of the writer's texts manifest an identical comprehension of the verbal narrative on the levels of theoretical literary scholarship and cinematic theory and practice. Bakhtin's notion of the chronotope presents a comprehensive spatial model with a corresponding type of time. In the intersecting context of Dostoevsky, German Expressionism, and Eisenstein (with his Dostoevskian *Ivan the Terrible* from Part Two), the chronotope of the threshold represents an intentionally constructed spatial formation which, by definition, demands the apprehension of a specific "threshold" type of time: the time of momentary nervous breakdowns and deep life crises — the only time in which *metamorphoses* can occur.

The main feature which unifies the staircases/corridors/entrances in Dostoevsky, in Expressionist cinema, and in Eisenstein's last film is their presentation as a constituent of confined, claustrophobic spaces. In this respect, they can be

10 Expressionist cinema was not the only branch of the movement Eisenstein was familiar with.

He was also acquainted with Expressionist painting, especially *Der Blaue Reiter* group. He was particularly critical of Wassily Kandinsky's views concerning absolute freedom in art (Eisenstein 1964-71, 2: 212-14).

9 For a comparative study between *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* and *The Battleship Potemkin*, see Minden.

juxtaposed to the exploitation of the image of the staircase in epic films. The famous steps of the Belshazzar palace in D.W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916) and of the Cathedral at Worms in Lang's *Die Nibelungen* (1924), as well as the Odessa steps in Eisenstein's *The Battleship Potemkin*,¹¹ are presented in the vast open stretches against natural landscapes. While the epic convention requires the inclusion of the particular spatial detail into the overall visual context, the Expressionist tradition uses it as a device which permits the concentration on the subjective internal mental states of the individual. In the context of German Expressionism — and, one can add, Socialist Realism — the chronotope of the threshold finds its simultaneously ironic and sentimental quintessential visualization in the image of the revolving hotel door as the working place of the protagonist in *Der letzte Mann*: the hero played by Emil Jannings, himself "unfolded out of Gogol's overcoat," experiences a Dostoevskian traumatic crisis, which, however, is resolved in the Hollywood poetics of the miraculous climbing along the social ladder.

V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The "overcoming of the threshold" is resolved with the "coming out into the square." The square can have two alternative forms: the chronotope of the public square or the chronotope of the marketplace. According to Bakhtin, the public square constitutes "a state ... the entire state apparatus with all its official organs, ... the highest court" (1981, 132). Giving this definition to the chronotope of the public square, Bakhtin refers it to the literature of Antiquity, i.e., to the past. The contemporary context of the end of the 1930s demands its perversion into the transvestite chronotope of the marketplace, where the power of the people gathered within the limits of the place is illusory, and where the borderline between the power of the king and the power of the rogue becomes totally blurred. Thus, while in Dostoevsky the overcoming of the threshold and the entering into the square finds its parallel between tormented soul-searching and consequent confession and repentance, in Bakhtin and Eisenstein of the late 1930s the entering of the square means the acceptance of the rules of the Rabelaisian carnival with its circus nature and absolute theatricality.¹²

The theoretical justification of the Rabelaisian bodies and the magnified world in *Rabelais and His World* (originally 1940), and their "parallel" visualization in

11 However, in his fundamental study on Eisenstein, Aumont establishes a direct parallel between the representation of the Odessa steps sequence and Eisenstein's expressionistic treatment of the murder in *Crime and Punishment*. The common denominator uniting the two works is the exploitation of specific techniques for the creation of distorted images (Aumont 17).

12 Significantly, Rabelais is a recurrent figure of reference in Eisenstein's works. Compare, for example, the exploitation of the Rabelaisian imagery in his article "Pantagruel Will Be Born" (1933).

Alexander Nevsky (1938) legitimize the transition in the personal stands of Bakhtin and Eisenstein, and their finalized resignation to these choices, which they never changed again. The full scale of the absolutization of the carnivalesque by Eisenstein finds its impressive resolution in *Ivan the Terrible*, the second part of which is the most ideologically controversial work of his artistic legacy.

In spite of the fact that Bakhtin outlived Eisenstein by almost thirty years, he wrote nothing principally new after his dissertation on Rabelais in 1940.¹³ In this context, the anecdote that during World War II Bakhtin smoked his manuscript on Goethe and the *Bildungsroman*, in which he tries to change his role from participant in the Rabelaisian carnival to an external observer of historical time and social progress no longer sounds so apocryphal.

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- 13 Compare with Todorov's claim that "there is no development in Bakhtin's work" (12), and his view that Bakhtin's evolution was completed before World War II. While the holders of the opposite view, Morson and Emerson, try to trace the continuation of Bakhtin's evolution up to the 1970s in their schematic representation of the stages in the scholar's career, they cannot pinpoint any global concept matching the earlier notions of prosaics, dialogue, and unfinality, to the period 1941-75. In terms of global concepts, they characterize this period as a "blend of all three global concepts" (66). In the list of "new concepts" for this period, none of the four items included — great time, creative understanding, genre memory, and genre potential — possesses the fundamentality of the "new concepts" of the previous periods, such as outsideness, polyphony, dialogue, double-voiced word, heteroglossia, carnival, and chronotope (66).

A Compromise with Literature? Making Sense of Intertitles in the Silent Films of Alexander Dovzhenko

Intertitles in silent cinema are amongst the most neglected elements in research on silent film.¹ Due to the rapid development of film form at the beginning of this century titles have generally been viewed with reference to the "talkies." The film directors of the silent era were not, however, comparing intertitles to sound possibilities, as we do today, but only to the rich silent cinematic tradition available to them at that time. Similarly, the contemporary audience of silent cinema expected and appreciated what was technologically available to them.

This essay describes the use of intertitles in silent cinema of the 1920s and reviews the theoretical debates surrounding them. My discussion will be illustrated by way of examples from the silent films of Alexander Dovzhenko (1894-1956), the least known master of the Soviet montage tradition. Dovzhenko's silent Ukrainian trilogy, *Zvenyhora* (1928), *Arsenal* (1929) and *Zemlia* (Earth, 1930), is considered his best contribution to film aesthetics and often cited by critics as an example of "poetic cinema" (Montagu, Carynnyk). By comparing the aesthetic choices made by Dovzhenko with the prevailing film practices of his time, I will show how he conformed to them and to what degree he managed to depart from them. A discussion as to whether intertitles in Dovzhenko's films contribute in any sense to the notion of "poetic cinema" will follow. In this context I will show the difficulties contemporary audiences may have when confronting Dovzhenko's films for the first time.

For many, intertitles seem to be the most obvious literary element adopted by cinema in its early days. Since their inception, intertitles have been alternately labelled as a cinematic element and then as an anti-cinematic aspect. A Ukrainian theoretician, who was Dovzhenko's contemporary, wrote of film and literature: "Cinema has to humiliate itself and seek compromises. Intertitles constitute the

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1 There is no theory of intertitles developed in scholarly literature. The most insightful discussion of this problem can be found in Bordwell, Steiger and Thompson, as well as Salt. The most comprehensive discussion on the subject is available in Russian (Tsivian, chap. 6) and Polish (Hendrykowski, chaps. 1-2); see also van Wert and Chisholm.