

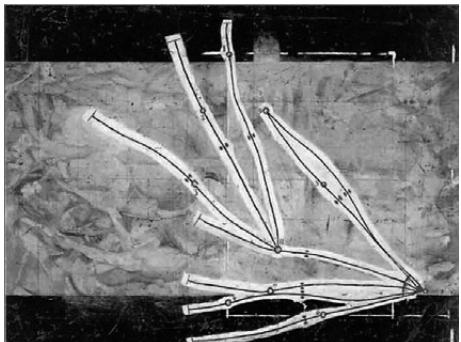
Film as Drawing: The Revolution
as a Problem of Perspective in Christoph Weber's
The First Minutes of October

Sven Spieker
Los Angeles, 2008

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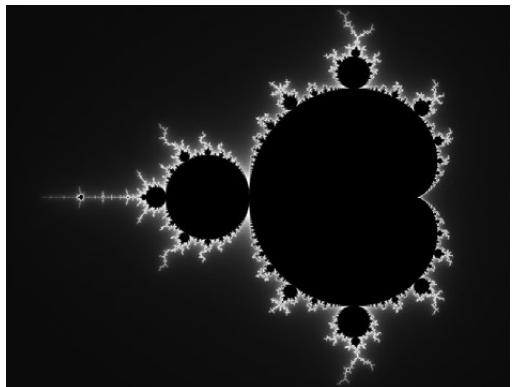
Christoph Weber's The First Minutes of October—an oversized irregular star constructed of 6 mm metal plates bolted to the gallery wall that oscillates visually between a three-dimensional sculpture and a flat, cartoon-like drawing—is a diagrammatic projection of the famous scene from the beginning of Eisenstein's revolutionary epic October. Ten Days that Shook the World (1927/28) in which scurrying groups of tiny revolutionaries topple the gigantic hollow head of a statue of tsar Alexander III by tying ropes around it. In a manner obliquely reminiscent of Marcel Duchamp's Network of Stoppages (1924) with its system of (chance-generated) graphs superimposed on one of the artist's earlier paintings, Weber's relief shows an abstract drawing that reproduces not the contents of Eisenstein's shots but the conditions under which they become visible. A commemorative gesture in more than one sense — Weber produced his piece on the 80th anniversary of the filming of October, while Eisenstein in his turn had been commissioned to complete his film for the 10th anniversary of the revolution of 1917—, The First Minutes of October is Weber's reconstruction, in two dimensions, of Eisenstein's approximately thirty different camera positions (in three dimensions) around the tsar's statue. Weber's work is partially an exercise in reconstructive optics; the pyramids that form the basis of the star encompass the many different angles from

which Eisenstein surrounded the statue when he filmed the scene in question. These optical pyramids add up to form Weber's monumental, irregular star that recalls both the flat, blown up icons from comic strips used by pop artists during the 1960s and the iconic symbol of the post-revolutionary Soviet state.

The monumentality of Weber's design—which was produced with the help of AutoCAD software—has a direct counterpart in the monumental nature of Eisenstein's (commissioned) masterpiece. Shot at a time when symbolically heterogeneous commemorative models such as photo-montage were decidedly on the wane, *October* demonstrates that in the late 1920s, the revolutionary dismantling of monuments could not proceed without a monumentalizing subtext, a subtext that reintroduces cohesive symbolism (the "Soviet" star) where filmic montage leaves only fragments.

Weber's imposing star, made up as it is of a multitude of interlocking shapes that appear both flat and illusionistically real at the same time, functions as a reminder both of the rejection of symbolic narrative and monumental pathos that is the legacy of the early avant-garde and of the increasing (re-)monumentalization that replaced it in the second half of the 1920s.

The most compelling aspect of Weber's work is the way in which it uncovers the surprising combination, in Eisenstein's scene, of optics—in the form of an



elaborate geometrical projection resulting in an abstract design that symbolizes Soviet power—with the theme of revolution. Weber asks us to consider the tsar-toppling scene from the beginning of October—in so many ways the most quintessentially “revolutionary” of all imaginable revolutionary scenes—as a hint at Eisenstein’s understanding of the October Revolution as a problem of geometrical perspective, a type of vision that operates in space rather more than in time. In this reading, the “revolution”—epitomized by the toppling of the tsar’s statue—amounts to a series of points in space on which the lines “drawn” by the camera around the monument converge.

The diagrams that form the basis of Weber’s monumental star reproduce Eisenstein’s scene at a different scale, much like Eisenstein had found a way of geometricizing the revolution at a different (filmic) scale. Paralleling Eisenstein in this way, Weber deploys his argument vis-à-vis the relationship between optics and revolution in the October scene not in the abstract but as an instance of “Nachvollzug”. In his early paper *How Long Is the Coast of Britain? Statistical Self-Similarity and Fractional Dimension* (1967), Benoît Mandelbrot argues that the length of complex lines such as coastlines or borders depends on the type of measure we apply to, a finding that links these phenomena to the notion of the *fractal* that Mandelbrot was to formulate

more explicitly in the mid-1970s. Weber's irregular star resembles a fractal in the broader sense of that term. However, curiously, unlike a fractal his star is not so much the object to be measured (as with Mandelbrot) as it is itself the result of measuring Eisenstein's camera movements.

Distinguishing retinal "vision" from "seeing" in the full sense of the term—seeing encompasses not just the brain but the body as a whole—Jacques Lacan defined vision as a form of mapping limited to space (as in perspectival drawing, for example). Such geometrical vision, according to Lacan, is the "point-by-point correspondence of two unities in space" whereby "the straight line plays its role of being the path of light."¹ It is precisely such vision that Weber uncovers in Eisenstein's film when he replaces the selected scene with the geometrical projection that underlies it. The vivid imagery of the October scene, Weber shows, owes itself to an apparatus of abstract geometrical measurement, a rationalized, rationalizing "drawing with the camera" whose points of orientation are two-dimensional techniques of projection. It is hardly by coincidence that the ultimate signified of Eisenstein's scene should be the revolution understood not as the reality of experience but rather as a symbolic abstraction, the "Soviet" star. The revolution, like Weber's star, owes its overwhelming power not to the spontaneous reflexes

1

Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (London: Norton, 1981), 86.



that seem to fuel the activity of the masses in the beginning of October but to pure optics, a calculated design that substitutes geometrical vision for seeing, the isolated eye for the body.

And yet, Weber's star, much like the film scene itself, exercises a near-sublime visual effect whose reach and impact cannot be fully explained by its geometrical coordinates alone. The fractal is a puzzle — it both resembles and does not resemble a Soviet star, while its erratically irregular structure clearly defies the ordered rationality we commonly associate measuring geometry. The First Minutes of October—reminiscent once again of Duchamp—is both the result of ordered measurement and vivid testimony to its ultimate futility. The most enduring—and ephemeral—effort to wrest the legacy of the October Revolution away from pure optics and its equation of the revolution with disembodied geometry and abstraction was Vladimir Tatlin's never-built Monument to the Third International (1919/20), a monument to which Weber's work alludes both through its modular structure and through the use of steel plates. Taking the form of helix, Tatlin's tower—whose revolving inner cylinder was to serve as the revolution's communications hub—describes a curve in three dimensions that continuously shifts between inside and outside parallel to a fixed axis. With its emphasis on progression and infinity, Tatlin's tower

2

On this connection see especially Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge/Mass.: MIT Press, 1993).

3

On this model see Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer* (Cambridge/Mass.: MIT Press, 1990).

represented a powerful effort to commemorate the revolution without representing it with the help of geometry, projective drawing, and iconic imagery.

Pure optics—which was in many ways the dominant optical model in modernism²—has its correlative in the ancient technology of the camera obscura, a contraption designed to give us the illusion that we are fully shielded from the projected image we perceive in front of us so that vision can be conceived as proceeding in full independence from the body.³ To argue, as Weber does, that the iconography of Eisenstein's seemingly spontaneous, reflex-like revolutionary scene (the toppling of the oppressor's statue by an enthusiastic crowd) has its basis in a type of geometrical mensuration whose most basic premise is the separation of the eye from the body and whose signified is a disembodied abstraction (the Soviet star) is to put one's finger on the most intractable dilemma facing Soviet artists and intellectuals in the late 1920s, the growing realization that the Soviet system was itself a kind of disembodied "pure optics". Vladimir Mayakovsky, whose suicide in 1930 effectively marks the end of the Soviet avant-garde, was certainly not the only one to agonize over the painful separation of the body from the eye (the mind) in the Soviet Union, a state he and many others perceived as quite literally leaving behind the desires, and the bodies, of its people.