
Montage of Attractions: For "Enough Stupidity in Every Wiseman"

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Montage of Attractions

For *Enough Stupidity in Every Wiseman*

By Sergei Eisenstein

I. THE THEATRICAL DIRECTION OF THE PROLETKULT

Just a few words. The theatrical program of the Proletkult does not involve the “utilization of the values of the past” or the “invention of new forms of theatre” but the abolition of the very institution of the theatre as such, replacing it with a show-place for achievements in the theatre or with an instrument for raising the **standard of training of the masses in their day-to-day life**. The real task of the scientific section of the Proletkult in the field of the theatre is to organize theatre studios and to work out a scientific system for raising this standard.

All the rest that is being done is “provisional”; to fulfill secondary, not basic, aims of the Proletkult. The “provisional” runs along two lines under the general heading of revolutionary content.

1. **Representational-narrative theatre** (static, real-life—the right wing): the Proletkult’s *Zori*,¹ *Lena*,² and a series of not fully realized productions of the same type—this being the direction of the former Workers Theatre with the Central Committee of Proletkult.

2. **Agit-attraction theatre** (dynamic and eccentric—the left wing): the direction promoted by me in collaboration with B. Arvatov, chiefly for the work of the touring company of the Moscow Proletkult.

In its embryonic form, but with sufficient clarity, this direction has already been pointed out in *The Mexican*³—a production by the author of the present essay in collaboration with V.C. Smyshlyaev⁴ (the First Studio of the MAT). Then, in our next collaborative work (*Over the Precipice* by V. Pletnyov),⁵ a total difference of opinion on basic issues lead to a split between us and the mounting of new works, i.e., my *The Wiseman* and his *The Taming of the Shrew*, not to mention *The Technique of Constructing a Stage Production* by Smyshlyaev, who failed to see the full value of what had been accomplished in *The Mexican*.

I consider this digression necessary since every review of *The Wiseman* that tries to relate it to any other productions whatsoever utterly fails to mention *The Mexican* (January–March 1921), whereas *The Wiseman* and the whole theory of attractions are a further elaboration and logical development of what I introduced in that production.

¹*Zori Proletkulti* was a performance by the Proletkult, in which the poetry of proletarian poets was dramatized. It was intended as an answer to Meyerhold’s production in 1920 of Emile Verhaeren’s *Les Aubes* (*Zori*).

²A play by Velerian Pletnyov about events on the Lena River in Siberia in 1912. It was presented for the opening of the Moscow Proletkult Theatre in 1921. Eisenstein was one of the artists who worked on the staging.

³*The Mexican* was a dramatization of a Jack London story. It was Eisenstein’s first production (with Smyshlyaev) at the Proletkult in 1921. Eisenstein also did the costumes and scenery.

⁴Valentin Smyshlyaev was an actor and director from the First Studio of the Moscow Art Theatre, who worked with the Proletkult and wrote a book *The Technique of Constructing a Stage Production*, published by the Proletkult. In 1923, he directed *The Taming of the Shrew* at the MAT.

⁵Presented at the Proletkult in 1922.

3. **The Wiseman**, begun by the Peretru⁶ (and completed as a joint enterprise of the two companies), was the first work, in terms of *agit*, based on the new method of constructing a performance.

II. MONTAGE OF ATTRACTIONS

Since this concept is being used for the first time, it requires some explanation.

The spectator himself constitutes the basic material of the theatre; the objective of every utilitarian theatre (*agit*, poster, health education, etc.) is to guide the spectator in the desired direction (frame of mind). The means of achieving this are all the component parts of the theatrical apparatus (Ostyzhev's⁷ "chatter" no more than the color of the prima donna's tights, a stroke on the kettledrum as much as a soliloquy of Romeo, the cricket on the hearth⁸ no less than a salvo under the seats of the spectators. In all their heterogeneity, all the component parts of the theatrical apparatus are reduced to a single unit—thereby justifying their presence—by being attractions.

An attraction (in relation to the theatre) is any aggressive aspect of the theatre; that is, any element of the theatre that subjects the spectator to a sensual or psychological impact, experimentally regulated and mathematically calculated to produce in him certain emotional shocks which, when placed in their proper sequence within the totality of the production, become the only means that enable the spectator to perceive the ideological side of what is being demonstrated—the ultimate ideological conclusion. (The means of cognition—"through the living play of passions"—apply specifically to the theatre.)

Sensual and psychological, of course, are to be understood in the sense of immediate reality, in the way that these are handled, for example, by the Grand Guignol theatre: gouging out eyes or cutting off arms and legs on the stage—or a character on stage participating by telephone in a ghastly event ten miles away; or the plight of a drunkard who senses his approaching death, and whose cries for help are taken as delirium tremens—not in terms of the development of psychological problems where the attraction is already the theme of the play itself—a theme that exists and functions even outside of the play's action provided that it is sufficiently topical. (This is an error into which *agit*-theatres fall, satisfied with only this kind of attraction in their productions).

On the formal level, by an attraction I mean an independent and primary element in the construction of a performance—a molecular (that is, component) unit of effectiveness in theatre and of *theatre in general*. It is fully analogous to Grosz's "storehouse of images" or Rodchenko's "elements of photo-illustrations."

"Component": Just as it is difficult to determine where the fascination of the hero's nobility (the psychological aspect) ends and the aspect of his personal charm (that is, his sensual magnetism) begins, the lyric effect of a series of scenes by Chaplin is inseparable from the attraction of the specific mechanics of his movements—so it is difficult to determine where religious pathos gives way to sadistic satisfaction in the scenes of martyrdom in the *Mystery Play*, etc.

An attraction has nothing in common with a trick. A trick, or rather, a stunt (It is time

⁶Abbreviation for the mobile troupe of the Moscow Proletkult Theatre.

⁷Alexander Ostyzhev was a well-known actor of the period who appeared as Romeo, Othello, and in many other classic roles.

⁸A reference to the dramatization of Dickens' *The Cricket on the Hearth* presented by the First Studio of the MAT in 1915.

to put this term, which has been excessively abused, back in its proper place.) is an accomplishment complete in itself in terms of a certain kind of craftsmanship (chiefly acrobatics). A stunt is only one of the kinds of attractions with its own appropriate method of presentation (or as they say in the circus—its “sale”); since it signifies something absolute and complete *in itself*, it is the direct opposite of an attraction, which is based exclusively on an interrelation—on the reaction of the audience.

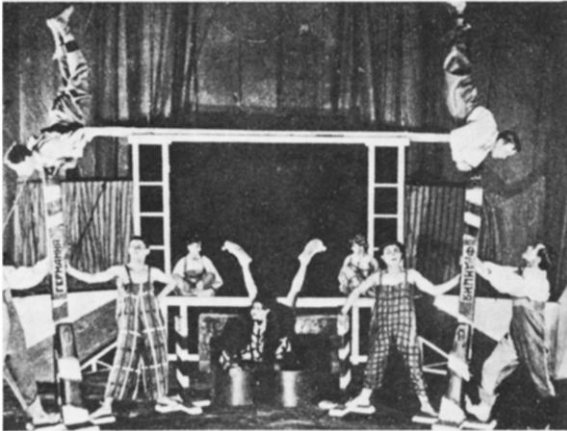
A genuinely new approach radically changes the possibilities in the principles of building a “construction that has impact” (the performance as a whole), instead of a static “reflection” of a given event necessary for the theme, and of the possibility of its resolution solely through effects logically connected with such an event. A new method emerges—free montage of arbitrarily selected independent (also outside of the given composition and the plot links of the characters) effects (attractions) but with a view to establishing a certain final thematic effect—montage of attractions.

The way of completely freeing the theatre from the weight of the “illusory imitativeness” and “representationality,” which up until now has been definitive, inevitable, and solely possible, is through a transition to montage of “workable artifices.” At the same time this allows interweaving into the montage whole “representational segments” and connected plot lines of action, no longer as something self-contained and all-determining, but as an immediately effective attraction consciously selected for a given purpose. The sole basis of such a performance does not lie in “the discovery of the playwright’s intention,” “the correct interpretation of the author,” “the true reflection of the period,” etc., but only in attractions and a system of attractions. Any director who has become a skilled hand due to a natural flair has intuitively used an attraction in some way or other, but, of course, not in terms of a montage or construction but “in a harmonious composition” at any rate (hence even the jargon—“effective curtain,” “rich exit,” “good stunt,” etc.). But what is significant is that what was done was only in the framework of logical plot probability (“warranted” by the play) and chiefly unconsciously, in pursuit of something completely different (something that was not in what was calculated “in the beginning”). In terms of working out a system for constructing a performance, there remains only to transfer the center of attention to what is proper, what was previously considered secondary and ornamental but what actually is the basic guide for the production’s nonconforming intentions and, without becoming logically bound by real life and traditional literary piety, **to establish the given approach as the production method** (the work of the Proletkult workshops from the fall of 1922).

The film and above all the music hall and the circus constitute the school for the montage-maker, since, properly speaking, putting on a good show (from the formal point of view) means building a strong music hall-circus program, starting from the basic situation of the play. As an example, here is an enumeration of a portion of the numbers in the epilogue to *The Wiseman*:

1. Expository soliloquy by the hero. [*On stage (in the ring), Glumov, in a (“expository”) soliloquy, tells how his diary was stolen from him and how this threatens him with exposure. Glumov decides to marry Mashenka quickly; he calls Manyefa (a clown) on stage and proposes that he appear as a priest.**]

*EDITOR’S NOTE: The material in italics represents a supplement to Eisenstein’s list of 25 attractions. The supplemental information was reconstructed by the still surviving participants of the performance —M. S. Gonorov, A. P. Kurbatov, A. I. Levshin, V. P. Sharuev, I. F. Yasykanov, under the general direction of M. M. Shtraukh.

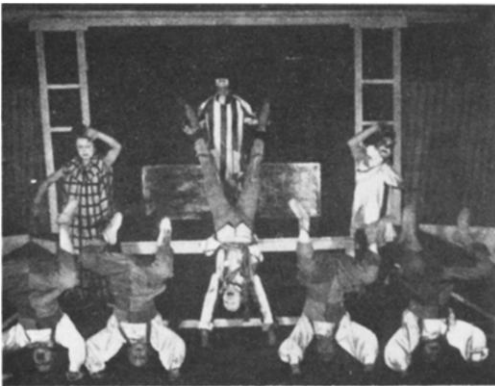


Attraction 1

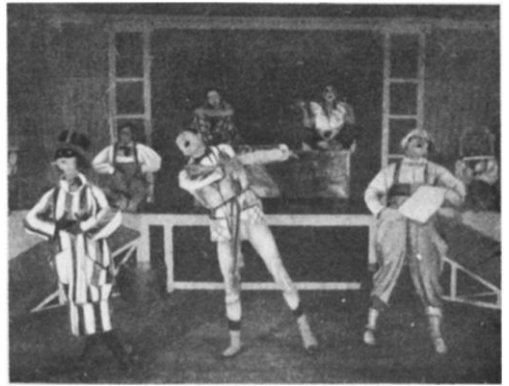


Attraction 2

2. Part of a detective film: (explanation of point 1—the theft of the diary). [*The lights go out. On the screen is seen the theft of Glumov's diary by a man in a black mask—Golutvin. This is a parody of an American detective film.*]



Attraction 3



Attraction 3

3. Musical-eccentric act: the bride and three rejected suitors (according to the play, only one character) in the role of ushers: a scene of sorrow in the style of the song, "Your Fingers Smell of Incense." [*Light in the auditorium. Mashenka appears in a motoring outfit with a bridal veil in a crown, followed by her three rejected suitor-officers (in Ostrovsky's play—Kurshaev), who will be ushers in her wedding with Glumov. The scene of parting ("sorrow") warms up: Mashenka sings a "cruel" romance "Let the grave punish me"; the officers perform, as a parody of Vertinski, "Your fingers smell of incense." (In Eisenstein's original plan, this scene was sketched out as an eccentric xylophone number, with Mashenka playing on bells sewn like buttons on the officers' uniforms.)*]

4, 5, 6. Three parallel clown acts, two sentences each (motif of payment for organizing the wedding). [*After the exit of Mashenka and the three officers, Glumov is on stage again. Three clowns—Gorodulin, Joffre, Mamlyukov—come running up to him one after the other out of the auditorium, and each performs his circus number (juggling with small balls, acrobatic leaps, etc.) and demands payment for it. Glumov refuses and goes out. ("A clown act with paired sentences"—for each exit, there are two sentences of text: the comments of the clown and of Glumov.)*]



Attraction 7



Attraction 10

7. Feature act of the *étoile* (the aunt) and of the three officers (motif of the rejected suitors). Punning with a transition through the mention of a horse to a triple-voltige number of an unsaddled horse (because of the impossibility of leading it into the auditorium—traditionally—“three as a horse.”) [*Mamaeva appears, dressed in provocative splendor (“an étoile”) with a circus whip in her hand and officers following her. Mamaeva wants to break Glumov’s engagement and consoles the rejected suitors. After their remarks about a horse (“My friend the mare neighs”), she cracks her whip and the officers scamper about the ring. Two represent the horse, the third the rider.*]

8. Choral-agit song: “The Priest Had a Dog,” to the accompaniment of the priest’s “bouncing ball” in the form of a dog (motif of the beginning of the wedding). [*The priest Manyefa is on stage; the wedding ceremony begins. All those present for the wedding sing: “The Priest Had a Dog.” Manyefa performs a circus number (“the bouncing ball”) portraying a dog.*]

9. An interruption of the action (voice of a newsboy for the exit of the hero). [*A newsboy yells through a megaphone. Glumov, leaving the wedding ceremony, runs off to find out whether his diary has appeared in print.*]

10. The appearance of the villain in a mask. A segment of comic film (a summary of the five acts of the play in the transformations of Glumov; the motif of the publication of the diary). [*The thief who stole the diary appears—a man in a black mask (Golotvin). The lights go out. On the screen, Glumov’s diary is seen in the film: It tells about his behavior toward the mighty patrons and about his transformations into various temporary shapes (like into an ass with Mamaeva, into a tanker with Joffre, etc.).*]

11. A continuation of the action with another group of characters (the wedding ceremony with the three rejected suitors all at the same time). [*The wedding ceremony is resumed. Glumov’s place, now that he has run off, is taken by the rejected suitors—the three officers.*]

12. Anti-religious song: “Allah-Verdi” (punning motif—the necessity of winning

Attraction 12



Attraction 13



over the mullah in view of the great number of suitors with only one bride). A chorus and a new character are used only in this number—a soloist dressed as a mullah. [*In view of the fact that Mashenka is getting married very soon to the three suitors, four uniformed circus attendants carry out on a plank from the auditorium the mullah, who continues the wedding ceremony already in progress, performing a parodistic song on topical themes—"Allah-Verdi."*]

13. A general dance. Business with a placard: "Religion is the opiate of the masses." [*When he has finished his song, the mullah dances a lezghinka, in which he takes all of the parts. The mullah picks up the plank on which he was sitting: On the back is the inscription: "Religion is the opiate of the masses." The mullah goes out holding the plank in his hand.*]



Attraction 14

14. Farcical scene: Putting away the wife and three husbands. [*Mashenka and the three suitors are put away in drawers; they disappear, unnoticed by the spectators. Those taking part in the marriage ceremony beat earthenware pots against the drawers, parodying the old-fashioned wedding ceremony "for putting the young away."*]



Attraction 15



Attraction 15

15. Scenes-of-domestic-life parody trio—the nuptial song: "And Who of Us Is Young?" [*Three of those present at the wedding ceremony (Mamilyukov, Mamaev, Gorodulin) perform the wedding song: "And Who of Us Is Young and Not Married?"*]

16. Peak of the action: the return of the hero. [*Glumov, running in with a newspaper in his hand, interrupts the wedding song: "Hurrah! There isn't anything in the newspaper!" They all ridicule him and leave him alone.*]



Attraction 17

17. The flight of the hero on a rope up to the cupola (motif of suicide from despair). [After the publication of the diary and his misfortune with the wedding, Glumov is in a state of despair. He decides to commit suicide; he asks the uniformed circus attendant for a "piece of string." From the ceiling a rope is lowered down to him. He attaches "angel wings" to his back, and they start to raise him to the ceiling with a burning candle in his hand. The choir sings, "An angel flew across the skies at midnight" to the tune of "A Beautiful Woman's Heart." This scene parodies the Ascension.]

18. Break in the action. Return of the villain, reprieve from suicide. [Golutvin appears on stage. Once Glumov has seen him, he begins to shower Golutvin with curses, lowers himself down and throws himself onto the villain.]

19. Battle with swords (motif of enmity). [Glumov and Golutvin fight with swords. Golutvin falls, and Glumov pulls out of Golutvin's pocket a big sticker with "NEP" on it.]

20. Agit-act of the hero and villain on the theme of NEP. [Golutvin performs a song about the NEP. Glumov joins in the singing. Both dance. Golutvin invites Glumov "to come visit him whenever he wants"—to come to Russia.]



Attraction 21

21. Act on an inclined wire: Passage of the villain from the ring to the balcony over the heads of the spectators (motif: "departure to Russia"). [Golutvin, balancing with an umbrella, goes along the inclined wire over the heads of the spectators to the balcony—"He goes to Russia."]

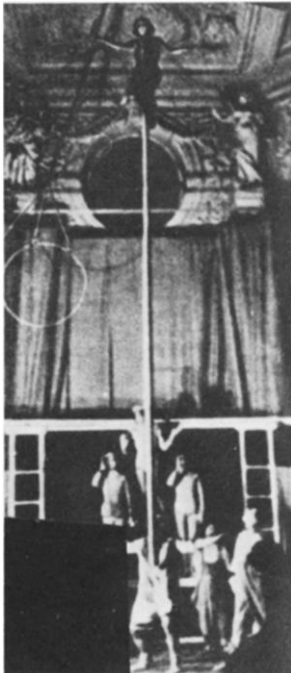
22. Clowns parody the hero's attempt and cascade from the wire. [*Glumov, deciding to follow Golutvin's example, climbs up to the wire, but falls off (circus "cascade"). With the words, "Oh, slippery, slippery, are these ways, I'd be better off in some back alley," he follows Golutvin "to Russia," along the less dangerous path through the auditorium.*]
23. Arrival from the balcony along the same wire by a circus clown hanging by his teeth. [A "red nose" (clown) comes out on stage and weeps, saying over and over again, "They went away but they forgot somebody." From the balcony, another clown comes down along the wire hanging by his teeth.]
24. The final feature act of the two clowns, who douse each other with water (traditionally) ending with the announcement "the end." [A squabble arises between the two "red noses"; one of them splashes the other with water, and he falls down with surprise. One of them announces "the end" and bows to the audience.]
25. A salvo under the spectators' seats as the final chord. [At the moment the clown bows to the audience, there is a burst of fireworks under the seats in the auditorium.]



Alexandrov and Eisenstein acknowledging audience's acclaim in final film clip.

The connecting moments, when there is no direct transition, are used as legato elements and interpreted as the varying arrangement of apparatuses, musical intermission, dance, pantomime, exits by the rug, etc. . .

1923



EDITOR'S NOTE: A different version of Eisenstein's *Montage of Attractions* by Daniel and Eleanor Gerould appeared in *Drama and Theatre*, Fall 1970.

Attraction 7

Mamaeva finds herself "up a tree."

On the Metaphorical System of *The Wiseman*

From Eisenstein's treatise *Montage* [1937, first published 1964]

Roughly speaking, the idea was for "astonishment," shown by the artist not to be limited to his "recoiling." His recoiling was not enough; a backwards *salto-mortale*—that's the range which the director's youthful impetuosity prescribed to him.

Exactly in this fashion the enraged Mamaev, "ready to fling himself" at the caricatural portrait of him done by his nephew, Kurchaev, according to the director's wish had to really fling himself at the portrait and not only fling himself but, tearing it up, fly right through it with a *saut de lion*. Mamaeva's remark about "being up a tree" immediately materialized, in that the "death mast" was brought in, set up on Krutitsky's belt, Mamaeva climbed up it and did the circus number "the perch." The metaphors, as it were, developed backwards to their non-figurative, primary, immediate prototype in terms of literalness, thus calling forth a comic grotesque "Aristophanic" effect. (Such a device was used in ancient farce.)

Perhaps most amusing of all in such a metaphorical system was the way the "image" of the hussar Kurchaev was handled. The idea of his nothingness, clichéness, banal "serialness" was handled by having *three* men play him *simultaneously*: identically dressed, moving identically and speaking in chorus the nothing substance of his dialogue. . . .

The theatrical portrayal of emotions was thrown out into the circus's abstracting of motion. In the same way, Ostrovsky's play of social manners was transformed in the contemporary circus ring into a play of generalized masks of Italian comedy and its great-great-grandsons. This was successful because Ostrovsky, working in the tradition of the Spanish and Italian theatre, had proceeded in the opposite direction: He embodied a collection of generalized masks in the manners characteristic of a gallery of typical Moscow contemporaries. . . .

In any case, in this first transposition, the generalized abstractness of the circus was seen through the objectiveness of the theatre. Such was the first double-leveledness of this performance. From theatre "down" to circus. The second was from theatre "up" to cinema. Not only because, by the "programmed" arrangement of this show, the performance was restructured by changes of actors, scenes and occurrences into a composition called "montage of attractions," which turned each fragment of the play into separate "numbers" and gathered them together into a single "montage" according to the image and likeness of a music-hall program. Not only because of that, but also because the action itself at the end of the performance turned into film. More than that—into a mutual interplay of the artists in the ring and also of those on the screen. The history of Glumov's stolen diary was "generalized" into a parody detective story with suitable film fragments. At that time, we were all crazy about "The Gray Shadow," "Secrets of New York," "The House of Hate," and most of all Pearl White. The substance of the diary parodied the idea of the "Pathé-journal"—at that time we were all wild about the newsreel and the first works of Vertov in the area of "Kinopravda." . . . Thus, theatre jumped across into cinema, pushing its metaphors to a degree of literalness inaccessible to the theatre.

Translations by Daniel Gerould

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