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Sergei Eisenstein: The Anthropology of Rhythm

An exhibition curated by Marie Rebecchi and Elena Vogman

Nomas Foundation, Rome 19.9.2017–19.1.2018



1 General presentation

The exhibition *Sergei Eisenstein: The Anthropology of Rhythm* explores the intersecting artistic, anthropological and political dimensions of the unfinished film projects of Sergei Eisenstein. Curated by art and film historians Marie Rebecchi (EHESS, Paris) and Elena Vogman (Freie Universität, Berlin), in collaboration with designer Till Gathmann (Berlin), it will take place at Nomas Foundation in Rome from September 19, 2017 to January 19, 2018. Numerous documents from the Russian State Archive of Literature and Arts (RGALI) and the National Film Foundation of the Russian Federation (Gosfilmofond) will be exhibited here for the first time, including notebooks, drawings, film footage and photographs.

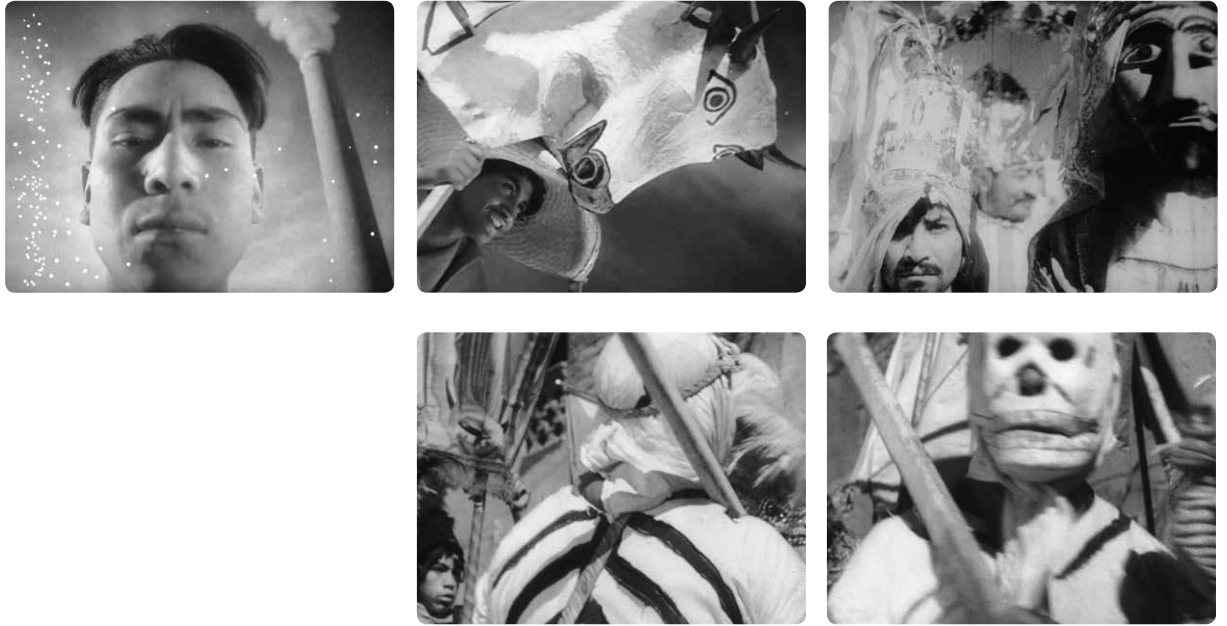
At the center of the exhibition stand three film projects of Eisenstein: the unfinished film *Que viva Mexico!* (1931–32), the destroyed film *Bezhin Meadow* (1935–37) and *Fergana Canal* (1939), which came to a halt before filming even begun. By focusing on Eisenstein's presentation of people, in particular the intense and astonishing variety of ways he filmed human faces, it illuminates hitherto unknown documentary and ethnographic facets of the Soviet filmmaker. Mostly unknown material from *Que viva Mexico!* serves as a starting point for this endeavor.

All following stills:
Sergei Eisenstein,
Footage of
Que viva Mexico!,
Gosfilmofond



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Starting from the idea of an *anthropology of the human face*,¹ the documents on display will articulate the transformative power of bodies in Eisenstein's work, unleashing their potential for rhythmical and ecstatic transformations. From face to mask, from body to skeleton, from human figure to architecture, from animal to vegetal physiognomy. Through film, photography and drawing, the exhibition sheds light on Eisenstein's outstanding cartography of expressive movements.



The curation is inspired by Eisenstein's analysis of the Russian word *oboroten'*, which means "revenant".² *Oboroten'* contains the word *oborot*, which denotes both "turn" and "figure of speech". Like revenants, words and forms also invoke the rhythmical choreography of the *turn* to unfold their transformative power. Through a rhythmical movement, they can reveal new social and political perspectives in an unknown or forgotten past.

Exhibiting remaining fragments, we intend to preserve the unfinished, non-definitive nature of these film projects. Focusing on the process rather than on the result of Eisenstein's creative work, we also want to grasp moments of digression and immanent montage proper to each cinematic work. The selection of the remaining original negatives from the footage is oriented through a morphological principle, which is crucial for the work with "*tipazh*"³ not as fixed image but as *metamorphosis of the face*.



1 Roland Barthes, "Visages et figures," *Esprit* 204, 1953, pp. 1-11. See Noa Steimatsky, *The Face on Film*, Oxford University Press, 2017.

2 Russian: [оборотень]. Eisenstein analyzes here also a "backwards projected evolution", a "drive" to re-turn into an animal state. He also observes the process in German and English in "Werwolf" or "werewolf". Sergei Eisenstein, *Method*, ed. by Oksana Bulgakowa, Berlin: PotemkinPress, 2008, p. 717-718.

3 The Russian word "*tipazh*" is a concept for a typical appearance, a representative of a social class, a protagonist of a cinematographic action which was opposed to star actor. The concept of *tipazh* was an important and polemical subject in the circles of the Soviet avant-garde cinema.

What does the physical, even the choreographic movement of turning have in common with the social and political change of a given situation?

Hannah Arendt once pointed at the constitutive tension of two opposing meanings of the word “revolution”. Originating from the astronomical context where it defined a cyclical and regular motion of the stars, in modern times the word “revolution” has come to define a unique historical upheaval of a given political order, enacted by men and not by the cosmos or the providence.⁴



In his images from Mexico and his later anthropologically-oriented film projects in Ukraine and Uzbekistan, Eisenstein brings these two different meanings into play. Here, we perceive the emerging relations of history poised between repetition and irruption, the *return* and the *revolt*, between a single destiny – a body or a gesture – and the social and political narrative which constitutes its background.

Although Eisenstein was never able to edit his footage from Mexico, we can discern through his aesthetic choices an immanent montage of his planned film.



Unknown author, Eisenstein's Archive from Mexico, 1931 RGALI, Moscow



Series “Trilikost”
(Threefaciality),
1931, Mexico

By turning the filmed faces to profile, turning them away from the focus of the camera, revolving them in an ecstatic dance, or dissolving their visibility behind a mask, human faces are made to defy the prevalent physiognomic, criminalistic or racial (nationalist) paradigm. The director unfolds a concrete spectrum of possible metamorphoses exceeding any fixed identification. His *revolts* unite rhythmical repetition with the emergence of a new anthropological-historical perspective.



2.1 Facing the Topology of History

This mobile coexistence of historical epochs, of actual forms and archaic forces, is mediated through a precisely choreographed repetition of gestures. As we know *Que viva Mexico!* was to consist of a prologue focusing on the cult of death in the pre-Hispanic past, followed by four novellas – ‘Sandunga’, ‘Fiesta’, ‘Maguey’, ‘Soldadera’ – and an epilogue devoted to the day of the dead. The extant film footage shot by Eisenstein doesn’t place this regular structure in the way that the well-known reconstruction by Gregory Aleksandrov does. The unedited footage resembles much more an extensive “fan”, as Eisenstein’s assistant Augustin Aragon Leiva describes his vision: “ages in Mexico are not in a vertical sequence, but in a horizontal development, spread out like an unusual fan”⁵. That’s why Leiva calls the film a “poem of a sociological character” rather than an “interpretative essay on Mexican evolution”.⁶



This material reveals an impressive variation of the gesture of *turning one’s head*: we see masked and unmasked faces, Christian and pagan dances, contemporary faces juxtaposed with monumental ruins of Aztec and Maya cultures. In assembling materials from *Que viva Mexico!* we do not intend to construct a possible montage of the film, but rather to question a more fundamental method of the cinematographic representation of peoples. While developing his politically motivated work with amateur actors in Mexico, Eisenstein elevated the practice of *tipazh* to an experimental *visual anthropology*.

5 Augustin Aragon Leiva, “Eisenstein’s Film on Mexico” form from November 1931, in: *Experimental Cinema*, No. 4, 1932, p. 5.

6 Ibid.

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He turns the Mexican faces into abstract landscapes, paradoxically revealing the cruel history of the country and its people. Turning the faces to profile and back again, he morphologically discovers the relations between different layers of history: the connections between modern Mexico and the ruins of archaic Aztec and Mayan cultures; the syncretic intersection of pagan and Christian rituals and traditions.



Tipazh tests for *Bezhin Meadow*,
1936, RGALI, Moscow



Beyond a mere metaphor for the reversal of power relations, the turning body provides Eisenstein with a formal tool for the shifting of perspective: in the process of turning, the figure connects with its background in a mutual plastic transformation. In this visual quicksand, the relation between the foreground and the background is put in motion. It is neither in the face nor in its profile, but rather in the metamorphic mobilization of its shape that Eisenstein locates the political and social potential of what is given to the eye.



Eduard Tisse, photographs from the Set of *Que viva Mexico!*, 1931, RGALI, Moscow

3 Eisenstein's anthropological gaze

With his collaborators Eduard Tisse and Grigorii Aleksandrov, Eisenstein arrived in Mexico City on December 8, 1930. Mexico became an experimental terrain where he could practice a “lay anthropology” inspired by the immense amount of ethnographic literature he had absorbed in Paris, England and America. Eisenstein’s “anthropological turn” had been anticipated during his stay in Paris from November 1929 to May 1930. The exhibition displays Eisenstein’s unpublished diaries, including descriptions of his encounters with Bataille, Rivière, Peuch, Bunuel and others, as well as his drawings of gnostic rituals, masks with three Janus faces, medals, etc. Linking Eisenstein to the surrealist ethnographers of *Documents*, we want to show how a “pre-logical” notion of the image informed the director’s ideas on the conflictual agency of montage.

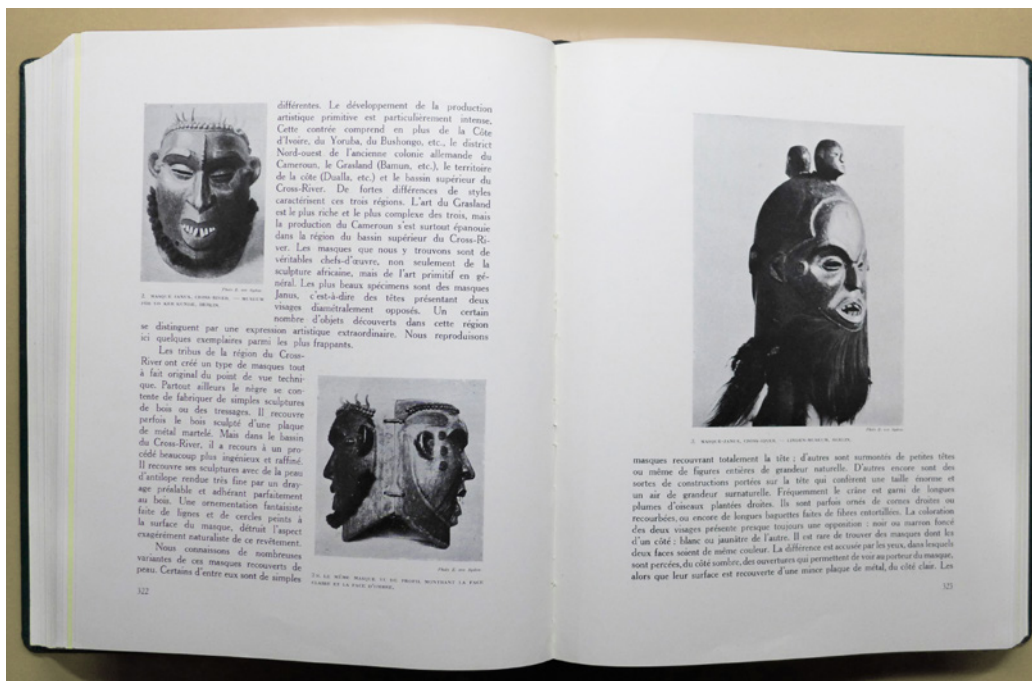
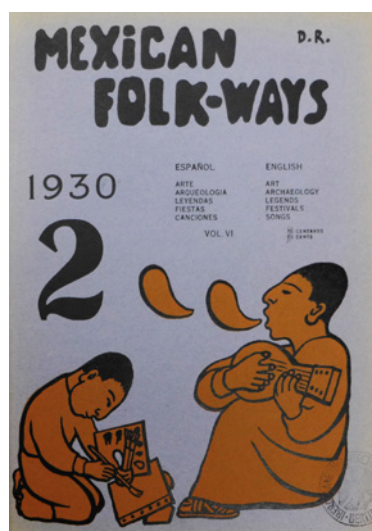


Figure from: Georges Bataille, “Le bas matérialisme et la gnose”, *Documents* 1, 1930

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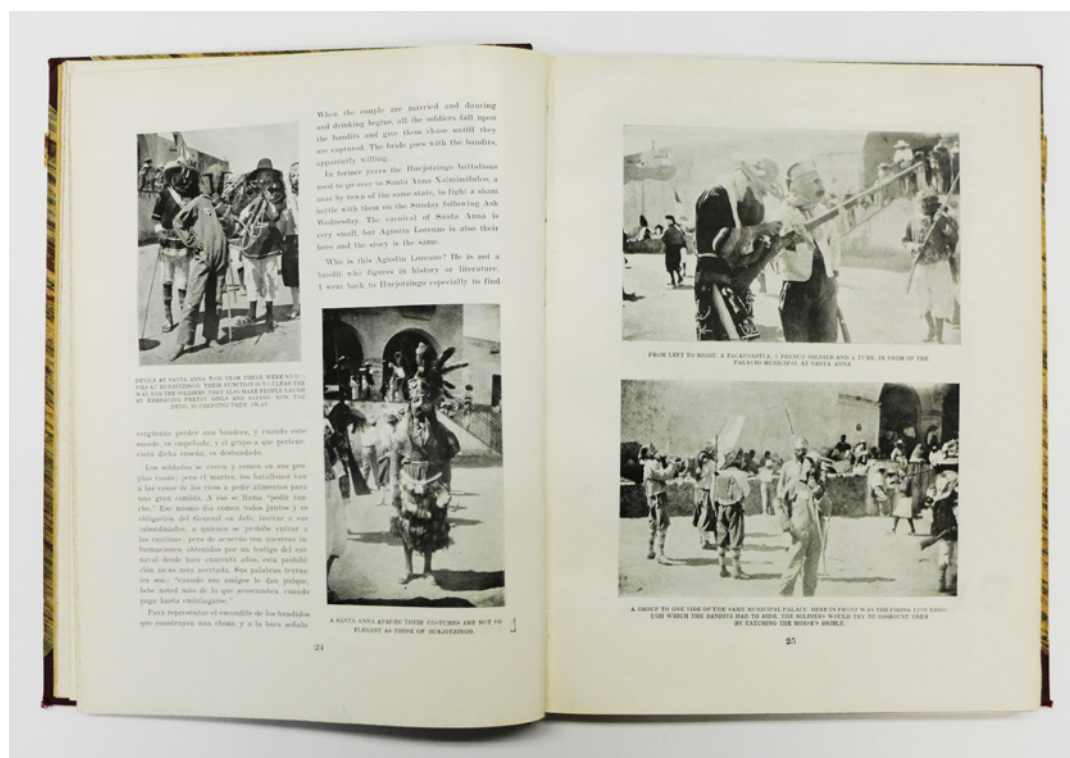
“Eisenstein looks for collective expressions and we cannot find these in contemporary art,” asserted Augustin Aragon Leiva, Eisenstein’s personal assistant on the production of *Que viva Mexico!*.⁷ The Soviet director turns his attention to archaic forms: “primitive mentality” appears in Leiva’s report as a hidden quote of a title by the French anthropologist Lucien Levy-Bruhl, which Eisenstein brought to Mexico alongside with 12 volumes of *The Golden Bough* by James George Frazer.

Indeed, Eisenstein shared an emphatically anthropological and political (rather than purely aesthetic) interest in elementary forms of social life with a group of contemporary Mexican artists and intellectuals. These were among others, authors and editors of the journal *Mexican Folkways* (Diego Rivera, Carleton Beals, Tina Modotti, Miguel Covarrubias, Frances Toor). The subtitle of the journal – “Art, Archeology, Legends, Festivals, Songs” – reflects crucial themes of Eisenstein’s film, bringing ethnographic and social issues together with political and aesthetic positions. Eisenstein’s intense reflection on different manifestations of religious, cultural and economic life of Mexican people perfectly echoed with the archeological approach to history in *Mexican Folkways*.



Cover, *Mexican Folkways*, 1930/2

Double-spread from Francis Toor, “Carnavales en los Pueblos”, *Mexican Folkways*, 1929/1

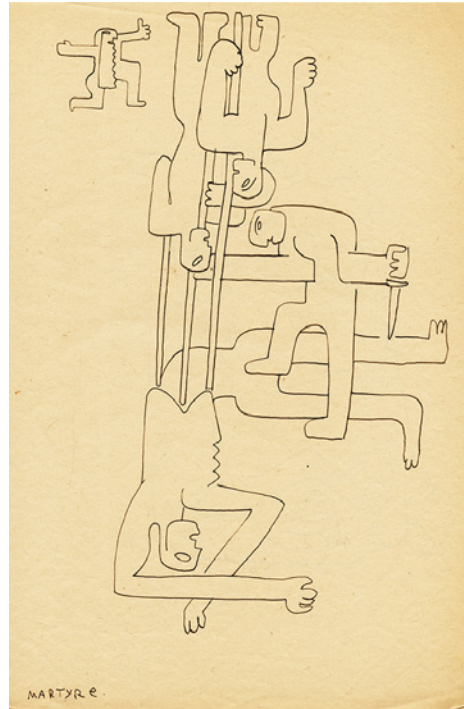
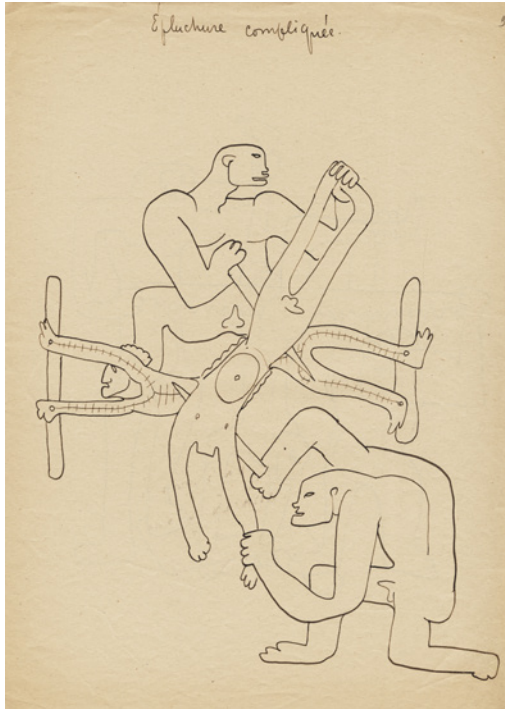


Figures by Thomas Hanforth, from Francis Toor, “Festival of the True Holy Cross of Taxco”, *Mexican Folkways*, 1930/2

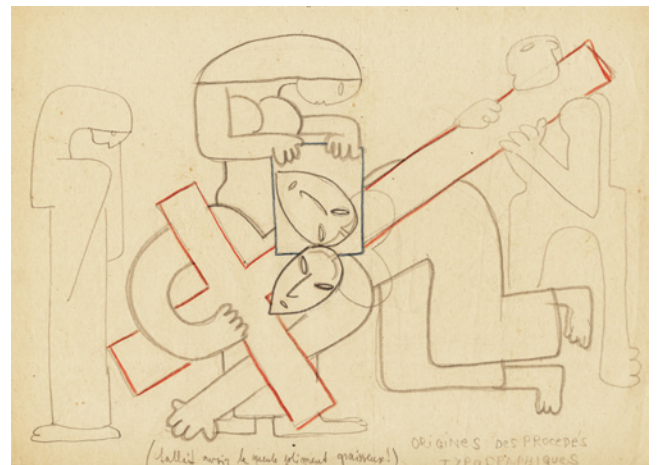


7 Leiva served in the capacity of guide, interpreter and adviser on Mexican folklore and history. In a text entitled *Eisenstein on Mexico*, he points to a fundamental aspect of Eisenstein’s “anthropological gaze”, that is the capability of being simultaneously immune to both the “exoticizing clichés” (Noble, *Seeing through ¡Que viva Mexico!: Eisenstein’s Travels in Mexico*, p. 179) so common in the discourse on primitivism at the beginning of the 20th century, and to the documentary approach of ethnographical films.

- (8) In his drawing practice in Mexico Eisenstein produced thousands of images in series. He called his trance-inducing drawings “*dessin automatique*”, in reference to the Surrealist *écriture de l'inconscient*. In over sixty drawings, included in five series, the exhibition explores this specific medium: between theoretical reflection and image production, between observation and ecstatic immersion.



Sergei Eisenstein, Series
“Écorchés vifs”, 1931,
Mexico, RGALI



Sergei Eisenstein, „Origines
des procédés typographiques“,
Drawings from the series
“St. Veronica”, 1931, Mexico

An excerpt from Eisenstein’s working diaries of the early 1930s, where he formulates the theoretical foundation for several uncompleted book projects, will be included in the publication which accompanies the exhibition. Eisenstein’s theoretical work is the less known and at the same time the most extensive part of his oeuvre, including endless digressions and the formal and linguistic montages which were a regular feature of his artistic output in general.⁸

The exhibition pursues Eisenstein’s anthropological exploration of the image through his unfinished film projects *Bezhin Meadow* and *Fergana Canal*. Despite the rising cult of monumentality in cinema and photography in the 1930s, which was strongly imposed by the propaganda (and latent mobilization for the World War II), Eisenstein’s projects preserve a crucial singularity in

⁸ This seems particularly striking in the case of Eisenstein’s theoretical work, which was published almost entirely only after his death, for example his opus magnum, *Method* which remained unpublished until 2002 and is today being translated into German, English and Italian. Indeed, the numerous unrealized film projects and books testify to the utopian, proliferating and overflowing character of Eisenstein’s productive imagination.

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the representation of the people. The exhibition investigates this line through archival materials and a slideshow reconstruction of *Bezhin Meadow* by Naum Kleiman. The preparatory materials for the Uzbek film on the Soviet construction of the “Big Fergana Canal” will be presented for the first time to public tracing back Eisenstein’s field research in Uzbekistan: the extraordinary documentation made by constructivist photographer Max Penson, Eisenstein’s drawings and notes for the film, studio samples for the roles etc. Eisenstein’s idea for the film was to juxtapose three historical epochs through the sorrowful memories and songs of the protagonist, the singer Tochtasyn.

Sergei Eisenstein,
Sketches for the film
project *Fergana Canal*, 1938



Max Penson, Documentation of the
Construction of the Fergana Canal, 1939

The Nomas Foundation will host the exhibition at its Rome venue and will publish the book in collaboration with NERO, Rome. Founded in 2008 by Raffaella Frascarelli and Stefano Sciarretta, the Nomas Foundation aims at encouraging the research within contemporary art languages through exhibitions, talks, seminars and residencies, in collaboration with academic institutions. The multidisciplinary approach of the foundation focuses on the analysis of global, political and cultural processes originating from the perspective of the artist as an observer of social phenomena. The typographical design and graphic display of the material for both the book and the exhibition are conceived in collaboration with the book artist and graphic designer Till Gathmann.

The majority of the films and archive material presented in the exhibition are on loan from three institutions: the State Archives for Literature and the Arts in Moscow (RGALI), which holds a substantial collection of Eisenstein's graphic work, including several drawings from the "Mexican series" made in 1931–32 during the shooting of *Que viva Mexico!*; the National Film Foundation of the Russian Federation (Gosfilmofond), the institution that manages the central film archives in Russia and which houses the original negatives of the remaining footage of *Que viva Mexico!*; the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), which owns a copy of Eisenstein's Mexican film *Episodes for Study*, the "study version" of the footage edited in 1957 by Jay Leyda, that Eisenstein was never able to edit himself.

The exhibition will feature a montage of sequences taken from footage of the film *Que viva Mexico!* (1931–32), Gosfilmofond, and from *Episodes for Study* by Jay Leyda (1955), MoMA. Alongside this footage, a slide show will present a selection of photographic screen tests of extras (face and profile shots) from the film *Bezhin Meadow* (1935–36), and photographs featuring extras from the film *Fergana Canal* (1939), from the Russian State Archive of Literature and Arts (RGALI).

Other materials presented in the exhibition include a selection of about 60 drawings (1:1 copies) from the "Mexican series," and others made during the 1930s (*Veronica*, *Stigmata*, *Éigmata*, *Apollo*, *Orpheus and Dionysus*, *Cyclops defeated*, and other small sketches of faces), a selection of pages from his unpublished diaries relating to Eisenstein's relationship with "heterodox" Surrealism (Georges Bataille) and his meetings with key European avant-garde characters of the late 1920s and early 1930s (including a selection of film-stills and postcards sent by Eisenstein to Jean Painlevé from the Painlevé Archive in Paris), and journals from the Eisenstein Library/Cabinet in Moscow, including a 1929 (July–September) issue of "Mexican Folkways" and a selection of pages from the journal *Documents* (1929–30).

The exhibition will be accompanied by a series of events, including panel discussions, screenings and lectures by cinema and art historians. It will also feature a number of events accompanying the exhibition: a publication prepared in collaboration with Till Gathmann, a new work by the contemporary video artist Clemens von Wedemeyer based on the footage from Eisenstein's Mexican Film, and a series of conceptual presentations on "anthropology of rhythm" including an ongoing research at the DFG project entitled *Rhythmus und Projektion: Möglichkeitsdenken in der sowjetischen Avantgarde*, located at the Freie Universität, Berlin. The following institutions are collaborating with the exhibition project: Eisenstein Cabinet, Moscow; Goethe Institut, Rome; Freie Universität, Berlin; University of Sapienza, Rome.