

Bryn Mawr College

## Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College

---

Russian Faculty Research and Scholarship

Russian

---

2022

### Review of 'Psychomotor Aesthetics: Movement and Affect in Modern Literature and Film'

Tim Harte

Follow this and additional works at: [https://repository.brynmawr.edu/russian\\_pubs](https://repository.brynmawr.edu/russian_pubs)



Part of the Slavic Languages and Societies Commons

[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

---

This paper is posted at Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College.  
[https://repository.brynmawr.edu/russian\\_pubs/16](https://repository.brynmawr.edu/russian_pubs/16)

For more information, please contact [repository@brynmawr.edu](mailto:repository@brynmawr.edu).

*Psychomotor Aesthetics: Movement and Affect in Modern Literature and Film*. By Ana Hedberg Olenina. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. xliii, 366. Bibliography. Index. Figures.

Aesthetic experience has typically involved an active audience, not a manipulated one. Yet with the rise of modern psychology and modern technology, artists and others saw myriad possibilities for gauging and guiding the response of spectators. The fine line between eliciting a physical or emotional reaction and coercion lies at the heart of Ana Hedberg Olenina's compelling study of the psychophysiological in early twentieth-century literature and film. Interdisciplinary to the core in the way it probes the intersection of art and science, Olenina's analysis of Russian and American "psychomotor aesthetics" and the theory underpinning this artistic turn toward the psychological offers an illuminating prism through which to examine early Soviet art and aesthetics. The rise of modern psychology, Olenina contends, "inspired both awe and the will to control" (xii), as artists—and politicians—calibrated audience responses.

While some (e.g., Nietzsche) resisted the mechanistic determinism of psychophysiology, many fin-de-siècle artists and scientists began to reassess how art might be perceived. The whole human body would be deemed essential to processing art. Starting with the Russian futurists and formalists before shifting to silent Soviet film, Olenina navigates in new ways a familiar historical trajectory from freedom to state control. Emphasis on muscular movement in both the creation and reception of art attracts Olenina's analytical eye, as do the problems that arose with a biological approach to art. Building upon the work of cultural historians such

as Jonathan Crary, Robert Brain, and, within Russian studies, Svetlana Boym and Emma Widdis, Olenina establishes important theoretical grounds for examining Russian and Soviet modernist aesthetics.

Much of the psychophysiological work done in Russia ran parallel to studies conducted in the West, yet Russian experiments with the spoken word went in a resounding, original direction. In Chapter One Olenina probes Viktor Shklovskii's formalist examination of "sound gestures" found in Aleksei Kruchenykh's trans-rational (*zaum'*) poetry, as she scrutinizes the debt Shklovskii owed to psycholinguistic work by Aleksandr Potebnia and German psychologist William Wundt. Olenina then explores in Chapter Two how the Russian formalists Boris Eikhenbaum, Boris Tomashevskii, Sergei Bernshtein, and Sofia Vysheslavtseva produced voice and articulation analysis via phonograph records of poetic performances. Working at Soviet centers such as Petrograd's Institute of the Living Word, these formalists saw the intellectual impact of literary form on the perceiver as generated by an artwork's "compositional architectonics."

Highlighting the role technology played in the era's psychomotor aesthetics, Olenina proceeds on to cinema. Lev Kuleshov's acting experiments, the focus of Chapter Three, underscores how reflexology developed by Ivan Pavlov and Vladimir Bekhterev informed early Soviet cinema. Foregrounded as well by Étienne-Jules Marey's proto-cinematic studies of human and animal locomotion, the biomechanical training required of Kuleshov's actors complemented the filmmaker's rapid montage. In Chapter Four and what emerges as the main

pivot point of Olenina's study, Sergei Eisenstein and his notion of kinesthetic empathy take center stage. Expanding on the work of William James as well as Ivan Sechenov's study of the nervous system, Eisenstein sought out ways to activate the corporeal empathy of filmgoers, be they children or adults, whereby actors' gestures and the trajectories of their bodies within the *mise-en-scène* were seen as determining spectators' experiences. Yet did Eisenstein's kinesthetics cross over into manipulation? In the fifth and final chapter of *Psychomotor Aesthetics*, Olenina delves further into how cinema was envisioned in the West and in the Soviet Union as influencing viewers through psychophysiological means. Telling interconnections between studies by Harvard researcher Hugo Münsterberg, the inventor William Marston, and Soviet experimenter Vladimir Pravdoliubov' are brought to light. But whereas crude capitalist concerns tainted the work of Marston, it was Stalinist antipathy toward experimentation that put an end to Soviet studies gauging how children—and others—perceive moving screen images.

Some readers might feel that the art itself gets short shrift in *Psychomotor Aesthetics*, but cultural analysis is where the strength and originality of Olenina's study lies. Save sporadic examples to accentuate this or that artist's psychophysiological approach, Olenina leaves the art analysis to others and homes in on broader aesthetic concerns. Looming over *Psychomotor Aesthetics*, however, is Theodor Adorno's remark, cited by Olenina, that "Science could hardly think up anything more alien to art than those experiments that presume to measure aesthetic experience by recording the heartbeat" (237). Experiments carried out in Soviet Russia and elsewhere may have been flawed, but, as Olenina emphasizes, they did prove impactful and

essential to the era's utopian thrust. Adorno's remark begs the question of whether such spectator studies were ultimately futile, but that is certainly not the case with *Psychomotor Aesthetics*, for it raises crucial issues about modernist art, its reception, and its interdisciplinary scope.

Tim Harte

Bryn Mawr College