

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION: *THIS THING OF DARKNESS: EISENSTEIN'S IVAN THE TERRIBLE IN STALIN'S RUSSIA*, BY JOAN NEUBERGER (ITHACA: CORNELL UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2019)*

Joan Neuberger

Introduction

Some time ago, I decided to take a break from studying the worst things human beings do to each other and focus on the best things we can do. This book is about making art in difficult times, because making art in difficult times is one of those things. Its subject is something Bertolt Brecht knew all too well: that in dark times, “There will be singing. About the dark times”¹. It is also a salute to Toni Morrison, whose words have buoyed many of my friends in our own dark times, and who wrote that “this is precisely the time when artists go to work. There is no time for despair, no place for self-pity, no need for silence, no room for fear. We speak, we write, we do language. That is how civilizations heal”². I don’t know if *Ivan the Terrible* healed anyone, and I’m sure Eisenstein took some time out for despair, but he also understood that in such times, “the main thing is to do. To really get down to it”. It probably killed him, but he got down to it, and he left us this beautiful, inspiring thing.

At the beginning of 1941, Sergei Eisenstein was feeling defeated. Three years had passed since he had completed a film and, on January 2, he confided to his diary that he felt like his broken-down car, lethargic and depressed. A few days earlier, tired of waiting for the film administration to approve his latest proposal, he had written directly to Iosif Stalin, requesting him to intercede. When the phone rang on January

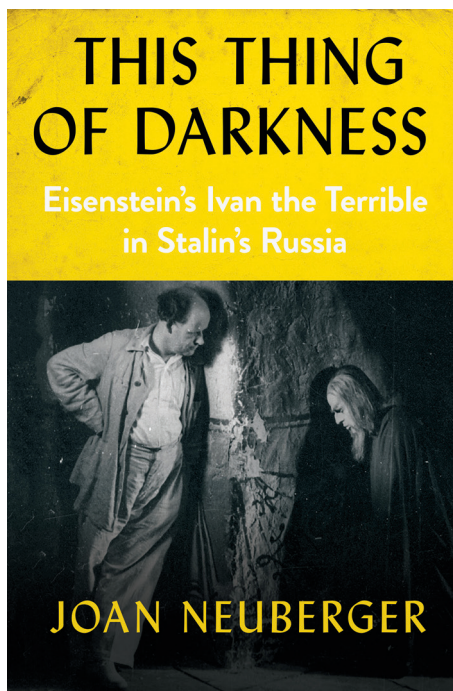
Joan Neuberger
Professor of History,
University of Texas
(Austin, USA)

11, it was Andrei Zhdanov, secretary of the Central Committee and member of the Politburo's Committee on Cinema Affairs, calling to say that no one was interested in his most recent pitch, but that they should meet to discuss the film Stalin wanted him to make. We don't know exactly what was said at that meeting, but immediately afterward Eisenstein began reading and thinking and jotting down ideas about Ivan the Terrible. By January 21, the possibilities for the project had captured his imagination and would not let him go. He was writing about *Ivan the Terrible* when he died, at age fifty, only seven years later³.

Those seven years would be the most productive of Eisenstein's life. Two major works of theory, unpublished; notes for at least four more books, unfinished; an eight-hundred-page book of memoirs, unpublished; diaries, letters, speeches, articles, newspaper articles; hundreds of production notebooks; thousands of drawings. They were also years of war: invasion, evacuation, an incomprehensible scale of death and destruction, and, after victory, a difficult reconstruction. It was in this tense but intellectually and artistically fertile context that he made his extraordinary film *Ivan the Terrible*, no less a masterpiece itself for being unfinished.

The film Stalin commissioned was expected to celebrate Ivan (1530–1584) as a progressive and visionary leader, the first autocrat who unified Russia and founded the modern Russian state, whose vicious reign of terror against his own people would be justified as necessary for preserving that state. Stalin, who didn't like surprises, got much more than he bargained for. Eisenstein's film ranged far from the official commission and was controversial even before it hit the screen. *Ivan the Terrible* was not only a shrewd critique of Stalin and Stalinism, but it raised profound questions about the nature of power, violence, and tyranny in contemporary politics and the history of state power more broadly. Eisenstein's film used Ivan's story to examine the psychology of political ambition, the history of absolute power and recurrent cycles of violence. It explores the inner struggles of the people who achieved power as well as their rivals and victims.

The process of thinking seriously about biography and history for the first time also opened up possibilities for Eisenstein to develop new ways to approach fundamental artistic problems of depiction and communication. To explore the political, historical, and psychological conflicts posed by Ivan the Terrible's story in the



Dust Jacket. Joan Neuberger, *This Thing of Darkness: Eisenstein's Ivan the Terrible in Stalin's Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019).

context of the 1940s, Eisenstein devised a style that grew out of his lifelong study of montage cinema. Because the details of Ivan's biography and his uses of power corresponded to many of Eisenstein's evolving ideas about art, the film became a laboratory for developing new cinematic methods and testing them in practice. Those methods both incorporated and challenged the prescribed conventions of Stalinist cultural production. Eisenstein was an omnivorous reader, and he drew on artistic practices from all over the world, from the earliest recorded societies to contemporary European modernism. *Ivan the Terrible* embodies Eisenstein's wide interests, complex thinking, bold originality, and experimental approach to filmmaking.

This book is the first to analyze Eisenstein's great masterpiece by combining historical, political, cinematic, and cultural approaches, which, I argue, is the only way to understand its sweeping achievements. *Ivan the Terrible* is much more than a movie: it contains a theory of history, a theory of political violence, and a theory of artistic production and perception. It represents one of the world's greatest filmmakers and one of the twentieth century's greatest artists experimenting with every element of film art in the service of telling a story about Russia's most notorious and bloody ruler(s) on the screen. He depicted violence not as an attribute of "the enemy" but as a universal impulse rooted in human psychology and history. And he didn't exonerate anyone: not Ivan, not Stalin, not the Russian people, not himself. As Shakespeare's aging magician Prospero said of his own project, Caliban, "this thing of darkness, I acknowledge mine"⁴.

Eisenstein was a sharp observer of the world around him, and *Ivan the Terrible* reflects not only his artistic thinking but his historical experience and political acuity. He came to this project after witnessing some of the worst episodes of violence in modern European history: World War I, the Russian Revolution, the Russian Civil War, and the Stalinist reign of terror, and he made the film during World War II. He saw class animosity and ritual humiliation produce a revolution that replaced one horrific regime with another. The creation myths he invented for that revolution in his first films in the 1920s made him world famous, but then he watched as the revolution degenerated into a dictatorship in the name of an idealistic and increasingly empty abstraction. The historical narrative that Eisenstein composed for *Ivan* is based on his reading of historical sources through a filter of his experience, intuition, and preconceptions, together with his vast reading in world cultures to show how such cycles of human tragedy could perpetuate themselves so destructively.

Eisenstein constructed his portrait of Ivan and his examination of power by posing several key questions: How does an innocent, vulnerable child become a sadistic, bloody tyrant? To what extent is Ivan like the people around him and, by extension, like us? When is killing justifiable? Do Russian rulers and, by implication, all Russians differ from their contemporaries in the West? When are we responsible for our own actions, and when can we blame circumstances? Each scene raises these questions in some form, so the audience is constantly being invited to wonder, compare, evaluate, and judge. Underlying these moral-political issues is a set of related questions concerning human emotions. In general, *Ivan* asks us to consider what role emotions play — in relation to reason and logic — in motivating us to act. More specifically, Eisenstein asks what happens when love, affection, sexual attraction,

grief, loneliness, hate, distrust, and the desire for revenge enter into politics. How are political affections and rivalries gendered? What happens when we are asked to love a ruler like a father? What role does affection play in a political brotherhood? These are questions that Eisenstein had been exploring since the beginning of his career as a director. In *Ivan the Terrible*, the persistent homoeroticism and fluid gendering with which Eisenstein poses these last questions played a major role in the film's narrative, form, and politics. These are not the typical structuring devices of the Stalinist biopic. Soviet film biographies of this period were supposed to depict a "usable past" and provide a model of behavior for viewers with characters who could be "guides to life"⁵. Individuals in film biographies, whether cult figures or ordinary people, were to undergo some transitional improvement, make a heroic contribution to their community, and offer moments of inspiration and motivation⁶. Eisenstein's moral, political, and aesthetic questions made a mockery of these conventions, while superficially complying with their demands.

Eisenstein's interrogative mode was a radical gesture in the Stalinist world of verities and positive role models. By raising these questions and by structuring the film around questions, Eisenstein works against the didactic, the simplistic, and the one-sided. The opposite of enforced certainty, however, was not amoral relativism. The ambiguities of the interrogative deny viewers a neutral vantage point and challenge us to reclaim our authority to make meaning from observation and experience. *Ivan the Terrible* is a difficult film because it continually presents us with contradictions and questions, and because it denies us a hero to identify with or a villain to hate. It is a great film because it creates a portrait of power that resists simplification and provokes us to engage with hard questions, precisely the hard questions the artist was supposed to suppress. And it's funny. Despite its violent and tragic subject, *Ivan the Terrible* is, at times, shockingly comical. A sly smile and an ironic grimace lurk just below the surface. Eisenstein used humor to question the performative seriousness with which Soviet rulers often presented themselves and to contrast with moments of profound pathos and tragedy. These are all anti-mythmaking moves by the director who brought us the original Soviet mythmaking films.

Ivan the Terrible was not Eisenstein's first film about a Russian ruler, of course, and its focus on an individual rather than the collective hero has made some viewers link it with *Alexander Nevsky* (1938) as a repudiation of Eisenstein's earlier revolutionary films and the radical cinema they have come to represent. Unlike *Nevsky*, however, the historical Ivan's biography offered Eisenstein opportunities to align the film narrative with his interests in psychology, history, and sensory perception. Rich sources about Ivan's childhood, his piety, and late-in-life remorse allowed Eisenstein to see the Terrible Tsar as a man riven by inner contradictions and unable to escape the trauma of his own past, psychological and historical-biographical structures central to Eisenstein's understanding of human nature. These contours of Ivan's life gave Eisenstein an unprecedented opportunity to explore the nexus of interior thought and feeling with exterior behavior and action, both on paper and on the screen. Eisenstein's writing of the 1940s — *Nonindifferent Nature* and *Method* — investigates the ways in which artistic form, individual experience, historical patterns, and political realities mutually constituted each other⁷. And *Ivan the Terrible* is,

in fact, a continuation and development of Eisenstein's earlier works. It displays the stage of Eisenstein's thinking in the 1940s but also shows that he was incorporating artistic and theoretical ideas he had been developing since the beginning of his career in the 1920s. Undaunted by his experiences with censure, censorship, and repression, he explicitly resurrected avant-garde practices and made a defiantly modernist, experimental film.

This book looks at the entirety of *Ivan the Terrible* in the context of Eisenstein's entire career, his wide-ranging reading, and the largely unknown writing of his last decade. Understanding *Ivan the Terrible* requires a global approach because the film reflects Eisenstein's extraordinarily wide range of interests and because he was thinking in global terms. His subject was political power and violence and his sources were political and art history from all over the world: from Machiavelli to Disney; Euripides to Shakespeare to kabuki; Pushkin, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky; Russian historians Karamzin, Kliuchevsky, and Soloviev; El Greco, Daumier, Piranesi, and Picasso; East Asian landscape scroll paintings, indigenous Mexican architecture, and pre-contact Peruvian ceramics; to name just a fraction of the artists and writers in play. Examining *Ivan the Terrible* together with the book-length manuscripts Eisenstein wrote while the film was in production and with the books he was reading and art he was viewing shows how his ideas about montage and meaning evolved through the 1930s and into the 1940s. Eisenstein was one of the first writers to explore in depth the importance of sensory-emotional responses to art and the ways in which structures of mind and physiology are essential to understanding our methods for deriving meaning in art and life. His writing about visual, aural, synesthetic, and cognitive perception places him among the great thinkers of the early twentieth century: Walter Benjamin, Mikhail Bakhtin, Aby Warburg, and Sigmund Freud⁸. Even more important, Eisenstein is the *only* major theorist of this period who was a major artist as well, putting theory into practice and developing theory derived from practice. In order to represent the history and psychology of power, in order to convey the inner life of the powerful in a way that would touch, move, and change people, Eisenstein employed a profusion of new cinematic methods meant to activate and intensify the spectator's sensory, emotional, and intellectual experience of watching a film. Much of *Method and Nonindifferent Nature* examined the role of story and character alongside his earlier preoccupations with composition and form in conveying an author's ideas to an audience. His extensive production notes (more about those in a moment) addressed details of Ivan's biography in conjunction with cinematic methods for telling Ivan's story. In general, his writing during this period concerned the particular ways in which cinematic storytelling could maximize the impact of the filmmaker's ideas and feelings on viewers. To some extent, these issues have been treated in the literature on *Ivan the Terrible*, but usually only in fragmented or speculative fashion. One of the contributions of this book is its systematic integration of Eisenstein's major writing of this period into an analysis of the whole film. Looking at *Ivan* in light of Eisenstein's intellectual preoccupations together with his biographical experiences shows that the historical and political aspects of his work are integral to understanding the aesthetic, psychological, and philosophical (and vice versa).

Eisenstein worked on *Ivan the Terrible* for five years, from January 1941 until February 1946, completing only two-thirds of the projected three-part film. Part I of the trilogy was completed in December 1944 and went into general release in January 1945; Part II was submitted in February 1946; it was banned in March and released only in 1958; Part III remained unfinished at Eisenstein's death in February 1948, but the scenario, some notes, and some footage has survived. Although the film became about much more than Ivan as a progressive proto-Stalin, Eisenstein's work was nonetheless haunted by Stalin himself. Like other artists of the period, Eisenstein stopped short of drawing direct comparisons between Stalin and Ivan in his public pronouncements⁹. But there is no doubt that while Eisenstein was thinking broadly about power and artistic method, his Ivan was always at least partially a portrait of Stalin. Stalin remained a critical presence in the production process as well, and Eisenstein appealed to him directly during sticky moments in production, going above the heads of film industry officials and his other Politburo patrons. He was not involved in day-to-day decision making about the film, but Stalin's response to each finished part determined the censorship, release, and public reception of both Parts I and II.

By emphasizing history and politics and by addressing Stalin's role in the making of *Ivan the Terrible*, I risk giving readers the impression that this study will center on Stalin, perhaps as a counterweight to most existing commentary on *Ivan*, which typically avoids politics and focuses on film form. But Eisenstein did not make *Ivan* with that kind of divide in mind. On the contrary, he consistently conceived visual, sensory filmic composition to be an instrument — a method — for constructing a coherent narrative, for producing an intellectual and emotional experience for viewers, and for conveying the author's ideas and feelings about the subject to the audience. The enduring importance of *Ivan the Terrible* is to be found in Eisenstein's multi-layered or, as he put it, "polyphonic" treatment of the life of Ivan the Terrible¹⁰. By approaching Eisenstein's dynamic theories of history, visual perception, and cultural evolution in relation to one another, this study uncovers a decisive piece: Eisenstein didn't only want to show the tragic depredations of absolute rule or the universality of power hunger, and he didn't only want to create a moving emotional experience for viewers. He also wanted to show how individuals, societies, and cultures change over time to become bloody tyrannies over and over again. And he tried to convey those ideas about cycles of change in a film structured to create a similar experience of change — recurring feelings of illumination and transformation — in its spectators.

* This roundtable is based on a panel discussion held at the annual convention of the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies (ASEEES) in San Francisco on November 25, 2019.

¹ Brecht B. *Poems, 1913–1956*, ed. by John Willett (London, 1997), p. 320.

² Morrison T. "No Place for Self-Pity, No Room for Fear", *The Nation*, March 23, 2015.

³ Diary entries: RGALI (Rossiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv literatury i iskusstva), f. 1923, op. 2, d. 1165, l. 1 [January 2, 1941]; f. 1923, op. 1, d. 529, l. 1 [December 31, 1940]; Vishnevskii V. "From Diaries, 1944–1948 gg.", *Kinovedcheskie zapiski*, no. 38, 1998, p. 66; Murin Yu. G. "Stalin and Cinema", *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 3, 1993, pp. 101–102; Eizenshtein S. M. "...Iz trekh navodiashchikh strochek..." (publ. by N. I. Kleiman), *Kinovedcheskie zapiski*, no. 38, 1998, pp. 138–139.

⁴ Shakespeare W. *The Tempest*, Act V, Scene 1 (Baltimore, 1970), p. 106.

⁵ The concept of a “usable past” is usually attributed to the essay by American literary critic Van Wyck Brooks, “On Creating a Usable Past”, *The Dial*, vol. 64, iss. 11, 1918, pp. 337–341; and was theorized by Maurice Halbwachs in: Halbwachs M. *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (Paris, 1925). Although not specifically referenced as such, the proponents of Soviet Social Realism turned to history in the 1930s for similar reasons: to legitimate the policies of the present, see: Brandenberger D., Platt K. *Epic Revisionism: Russian History and Literature as Stalinist Propaganda* (Madison, 2006); Dobrenko E. *The Political Economy of Socialist Realism* (New Haven, 2007).

⁶ Vasilyeva E. *Two Decades of Soviet Biographical Film: From Revolutionary Romanticism to Epic Monumentalism (1934–1953)* [PhD Dissertation] (University of Southern California, 2009); Clark K. *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*, 3rd ed. (Bloomington, 2000).

⁷ Eizenshtein S.M. *Nonindifferent Nature*, in 2 vols (Moscow, 2004–2006); Eizenshtein S.M. *Method* (Moscow, 2002).

⁸ For a few selected works in English, see: Benjamin W. *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, 2002); Benjamin W. “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. by Hannah Arendt (New York, 1968); Bakhtin M.M. *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge, 1968); Bakhtin M.M. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. by Michael Holquist (Austin, 1981); Warburg A. “Dürer and Italian Antiquity (1905)”, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity* (Los Angeles, 1999); Warburg A. *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne. The Original*, eds Roberto Ohrt, Axel Heil (Berlin — Stuttgart, 2020); Freud S. *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (London, 2017); Freud S. *Totem and Taboo* (New York, 1998); Freud S. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (New York, 1961); Freud S. *Civilization and its Discontents* (New York, 1989).

⁹ Platt K. *Terror and Greatness: Ivan and Peter as Russian Myths* (Ithaca, 2011), pp. 211–214; Brandenberger D., Platt K. “Terribly Pragmatic: Rewriting the History of Ivan IV’s Reign”, *Epic Revisionism: Russian History and Literature as Stalinist Propaganda*, eds Kevin Platt, David Brandenberger (Madison, 2006), p. 165.

¹⁰ For more on Eisenstein’s concept of polyphony, see: Eisenstein S.M. *Nonindifferent Nature*, vol. 2, pp. 420–459.

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Abstract: Eisenstein’s Ivan the Terrible is hardly an obscure film, but it has attracted much controversy and many misconceptions. The goal of this book is to re-examine the film in light of everything Eisenstein wrote about it. The introduction to the roundtable establishes the historical, political, cinematic, biographical, and cultural contexts that shape the book’s multi-disciplinary approach to Eisenstein’s work on Ivan the Terrible. The director structured the story of Ivan’s life and reign in an “interrogative mode” in order to raise profound questions about the nature of violence and tyranny and the psychology of political ambition in Russia’s past, in the Stalinist present, and in the history of state power more broadly. Eisenstein conveyed the history and psychology of power and the inner life of the powerful with a profusion of new cinematic methods that represented the evolution of his thinking about montage. “Polyphonic” montage — the weaving together of audio, visual, sensory, emotional, and intellectual voices—was intended to activate and intensify the spectator’s experience of watching a film; to touch, move, and enlighten the audience in an all-encompassing, transformative way. By approaching Eisenstein’s dynamic theories of history, visual perception, and cultural evolution in relation to one another, this study uncovers a decisive piece: Eisenstein didn’t only want to show the tragic deprivations of absolute rule or the universality of power hunger, and he didn’t only want to create a moving emotional experience for viewers.

Keywords: Eisenstein, Ivan the Terrible, Stalin, cinema, montage, polyphonic.

Author: Neuberger J. — Professor of History, University of Texas at Austin (Austin, USA);
neuberger@austin.utexas.edu

University of Texas at Austin, 110, Inner Campus Drive, Austin, TX 78705, USA

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