

Joan Neuberger

Response to Roundtable Comments*

If readers make books meaningful, the roundtable that David Brandenberger organized provided my book with ideal readers. I am immensely grateful for their generous praise, as well as for the questions they raised that move the discussion of Eisenstein's brilliant, troubled career beyond this one book and into the future. I am especially grateful because the authors represented here are friends who have been my favorite — and at times most difficult — interlocutors over the years. As Naum Kleiman noted in describing our first memorable meetings among Eisenstein's books in Moscow, he and they have all helped me refine my initial readings and take my thinking in productive, new directions. It is an honor to have the chance to continue our conversations here.

In this response, I am able to address only a few of the issues they raised that point to different ways this book, and indeed any book, can be read. The roundtable inspired me to clarify some points and to offer readers ways to think about the book's central arguments as they (re)watch *Ivan the Terrible* and read about it.

Both Brandenberger and Yuri Tsivian address the way I characterize Eisenstein as an artist and individual. Tsivian correctly notes that, as a historian, my aim is to avoid moral judgment of Eisenstein, because I see my job as excavating the circumstances in which people act, and showing what

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they could do, what they did, and what they thought they were doing. I wanted to sidestep the moral binaries that are often imposed on studies of life in politically difficult times, so that I could show the ways that participation in, ambivalence about, and resistance to the world can coexist and must be read all together to understand the complexity of Stalinist reality as reflected in Eisenstein's work and life. We can't erase Eisenstein's pro-Stalin newspaper articles or his desire for a Stalin Prize or his pleasure in his Soviet privileges — his chauffeur-driven car and large apartment — but, more important, I wanted to show how living and benefiting from the Soviet system is foundational in Eisenstein's view of the world.

For these reasons, I found Brandenberger's emphasis on Eisenstein's exceptionalism surprising. Ironically, it was Brandenberger's question about that exceptionalism at a conference some years ago that led me to investigate the interplay between Eisenstein's typicality and his singularity. Of course, his intellectual brilliance, his multiple artistic talents, his willingness to breach political and intellectual limits, and his personal ties with the Kremlin leadership are all key to understanding both *Ivan the Terrible* and Eisenstein's place in history. But, in terms of subjectivity, while I would call Eisenstein unusually talented and privileged, it's important to keep in mind that he was also undoubtedly a creature of Bourdieu's local habitus, which shaped his thinking and his perspective on the world¹. The Soviet habitus rewarded him more than most, but it tormented him in ways that were not uncommon. He suffered from the same petty and not so petty personal humiliations, bureaucratic limitations, and outright dangers that were visited on the rest of the Soviet population by its government.

Eisenstein's variegated experiences and the ways his life evolved over time are materialized in *Ivan the Terrible*, both its process of production and as work of art. Revolution, revolutionary art, Stalinism, Kremlin commissions shaped his world view in a dialectical and generative tension with his cosmopolitan reading and experiences outside the country. In each chapter of the book — on production, history, tragedy, characters, film form, and reception — I tried to show the importance of the interplay of ordinary and extraordinary in Eisenstein's thinking, practice, and behavior.

In this context, Karen Petrone's question about the audience's reception of *Ivan the Terrible* becomes especially intriguing. Could Eisenstein have made a film about Ivan the Terrible that exposed the dangerous contradictions of Stalinist ideology and policy that could be understood by his contemporaries? I don't know if that question can be answered, but it is worth asking because it requires us to think about the problems of reception specific to time and place. Beyond the individual psychological and the diverse social as factors in film reception, the historical contextual also helps us understand patterns of reception. We know that Eisenstein didn't expect *Ivan the Terrible* to be a blockbuster; he knew it was a formally challenging film as well as a politically complex one. We also know that he was delighted when his friends read it the way he wanted them to. In the book, I offer some explanations for why I think *Ivan the Terrible* has been so widely and variously misunderstood, both politically and formally. *Ivan the Terrible* is a film that has always been viewed through powerful distorting filters, primarily based on historically constructed political and cultural preconceptions. *Ivan the Terrible* has never *not* been viewed through

a political filter, from contemporary assumptions about Socialist Realism and Stalinist censorship, to Cold War era retrospective assumptions about what was possible for artists under Stalin, to post-Soviet reversed assumptions about Eisenstein himself. Among other things, I argue that this political (and intellectual) filter flattened responses and prevented engagement with the sensory-emotional experience Eisenstein was trying to provide for viewers.

If political filters shaped the way Eisenstein's film was read, intellectual filters have also shaped the way my book has been read. Brandenberger's objection to my argument that Stalin and colleagues were outraged by *Ivan's* homoeroticism, raises interesting questions about the assumptions we bring to even the most careful argumentation. Brandenberger is one of the most knowledgeable historians working on this period today and his objection is rigorously argued based on his discovery of a new source for studying *Ivan*: Andrei Zhdanov's private notes about Stalin's response to *Ivan* Part II in March 1946 and about his famous conversation with Cherkasov and Eisenstein in February 1947. But both Brandenberger and I making arguments about things left unsaid, and arguments about absences will always be tricky. Interpreting an absence requires thinking through what's possible and what's probable, grounded in what we "know" about the subject and the period. I argue that the documents disguise feelings about sexuality because none of the men involved wanted to talk about sex, but at the same time I believe that one can infer Stalin's objection to the film's homoeroticism in the evasive language he did use. Brandenberger argues that that Zhdanov's notes on the behind-closed-doors March discussion likely represent "a verbatim record of Stalin's verdict on the film" and show that Stalin and Zhdanov didn't talk about sexuality because it wasn't important to them. But these notes were for the draft of the Central Committee resolution banning Part II as "anti-historical and anti-artistic", qualities that were more than enough to justify the decision for the Central Committee and the public. Who knows what else Stalin might have said to Zhdanov, or thought but left unsaid, that Zhdanov didn't need to write down in that specific political context no matter how obsessively he took notes? Certainly there were viewers in the 1940s who didn't register the homoeroticism and homosociality in *Ivan the Terrible* that are so visible now. But Lavrenty Beria did, and in Stalin's presence. After the Kremlin viewing of *Ivan* Part II, when Beria likened the Dance of the Oprichniki to *khlystovskie radeniia*, he was making an analogy between Eisenstein's oprichniki and the heretical *khlysty* sect's all-male, homoerotic ritual dance. Brandenberger also objects to my interpretation of Stalin's repeated use of the word "degenerate", to describe the oprichniki and convey his disgust with their homoeroticism. As Brandenberger notes, "*degenerat*" can mean many things in Russian. But he overlooks the argument I make about the representation of the oprichniki in the film. Stalin wanted the oprichniki to look more like a regular army or formal palace guard but that's not all he wanted. He specifically associated that lack of formality and regularity in Eisenstein's oprichniki with "degeneracy", yet the behavior and the look of the oprichniki fit no definition of *degenerat* other than the sexual one, a usage we also find in a document about homosexuality that Stalin annotated². Eisenstein's oprichniki are *Ivan's* "effective instrument", as Stalin himself put it, approvingly, when he read the screenplay. It is only their clothing, postures,



Fed'ka during the Dance of the Oprichniki
 Photograph from *Ivan Groznyi, Part II* (Mosfil'm, 1945; released 1958).

and physical affection, only their homoeroticism, and only apparent in the visual, that marks them as *degeneraty*.

My main point here is that our differences reflect the divergent images of Stalin that we bring to our thinking. Brandenberger's Stalin is rational, careful politician, who conforms to the chaste public image he projected and whose stated objections to *Ivan Part II*, can be taken at face value. My Stalin was given to private emotional outbursts, outrage at an artist's defiance, and anger that the Kremlin's carefully crafted all-male social-political circle that he manipulated with secrecy, competition, and coerced all-night alcoholic binging might be portrayed on screen as a *khlystovskie radeniia* or a homosocial world of surreptitious sexual attraction. The absence of erotica in Stalin's library or sexuality in his public utterances is less important to me as evidence than those all-night parties and his 1930s suppression of the sexual revolution of the 1920s.

Kevin Platt's objection to my method and my conclusions is likewise rooted in an intellectual construct: a preference for a certain mode of argumentation (identifying contradictions) and resistance to another mode (drawing conclusions). My challenge to this construct and my attempt to complicate it strike Platt as what he calls a "hermeneutic positivist" stance. He supports his criticism, first, with the argument I make at the beginning of the book, that Eisenstein created a politically orthodox surface narrative, which he then proceeded to demolish. Platt writes off this binary structure — surface and depth — and the hermeneutics it implies as simplistic and reductive. He also takes exception to my statement at the end, that Eisenstein intended *Ivan the Terrible* to be read not only as a study in contradictions, but as a "radical, critical, and subversive" film. Platt attributes this conclusion (and

conclusion-drawing in general) to my training as a historian, which he criticizes as an outmoded effort to find the “true meaning”, of *Ivan the Terrible* as a work of art.

Platt finds these elements of my argument “confounding”. The rest of the book, he writes, presents “Eisenstein’s view of human history as an inscrutable dialectical process”, which he sees as fundamentally “at odds” with my eagerness to draw conclusions from contradictions. But it is Platt’s arguments that strike me as confounding. Why is it so hard to imagine an Eisenstein who conceptualized the world — history, subjectivity, art/tragedy, ideology, visual perception — as inherently, deeply contradictory and yet felt he was capable of drawing nuanced conclusions about the consequences and meanings of those contradictions? Why dismiss those twin processes, as Platt does, as a misguided effort to find the “true meaning” of the film?

Platt can construe my argumentation as “confounding” and “reductive” only by taking individual sentences out of their context; and by separating contradictions from conclusions and placing them “at odds”, rather than seeing them dialectically as Eisenstein did (and I do). Take Platt’s focus on the “Aesopian” and hermeneutic. I do indeed begin discussing narrative structures with the concept of a two-layered surface and depth, but I use that formulation to introduce Eisenstein’s much more tangled, multi-faceted understanding of the subtle ways surfaces can be made to conceal things in order to be discovered incrementally by spectators; a key factor in Eisenstein’s narrative strategy. I follow Eisenstein here, not in search for some definitive “true meaning” of *Ivan the Terrible*, but to show how Eisenstein introduces us to this familiar binary only to reveal all the ways that T. S. Eliot’s “skull beneath the skin”³ is, as Eisenstein put it, a dynamic “living image, in which the skull really does come to the surface. The face emerges through the skull... One, living on top of the other. One hidden beneath the other... And one repeating the physical outline of the process via the interplay of face and skull, changing masks”⁴. In subsequent chapters, I show how Eisenstein further complicated that apparent surface/depth binary by placing it in dialogue with the spiral and the fugue, which both invite interpretation and thwart hermeneutics. Equally important here, I show that these multi-structured invitations to mentally unravel the work’s woven spiral and fugue-like structures, defy the rational, logical work of hermeneutics because in Eisenstein’s writing such intellectual work is never separated from anti-rational sensing and feeling. Far from embracing the simple binary of surface and depth, I show these layered, intersecting structures as representative of Eisenstein’s understanding of the multiple, simultaneous, complementary, and contradictory forms that shape our interaction with the world; that both invite and impede attempts to understand. This film is less about impenetrable contradictions than about the ways we use thinking and feeling to interpret the past and the present by immersing ourselves in what we see.

Eisenstein did not view the world as “inscrutable” or intend his film to be “inscrutable”. He wanted to understand and be understood. He described his writing as “mountain upon mountain of conclusions and observations”⁵ and he saw his films as conveying “the thoughts, the feelings, the very being and existence of the author”, even if he knew that his thinking was too complex for many viewers and readers⁶. And he doesn’t stop at raising questions, no matter how much some of my readers would prefer that. In the film, Ivan constantly asks us to judge him; Eisenstein’s nar-

rative and cinematic strategies repeatedly beg us to hunt through the questions he raises for some answers⁷. Furthermore, we are implored to draw conclusions not only about Ivan's inner turmoil or the ambiguous contingencies of political responsibility, but to judge the impact of the actions that Ivan's inner conflicts produce. This is the context in which I make one of the statements that Platt singles out as reductive. Let me quote the whole paragraph in question because it represents my understanding of Eisenstein's approach:

The tragedy of Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible* is that his inner conflicts had consequences: real, deadly, unambiguous consequences for the people around him. He may have remained indefinable, but the contradictions that... are so attuned with our desire to read contingency and ambiguity into everything, brought destruction, death, trauma, and debasement that were real. This double dialectic is at the heart of Eisenstein's work: inner contradiction, on the one hand, faces off against the unequivocal, on the other. Eisenstein had a finely tuned sense of contingency and contradiction, but he also understood that while death is necessary to life, it doesn't feel that way to the dead or their children (344).

Platt labels this kind of analysis "formulae that fail to capture the complexity of Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible* and its view of history". But Eisenstein himself tells us more than once that this collocation of the indeterminate and the conclusive, the contradictions and the conclusions, are central to his thinking. Some readers of his screenplay for *Ivan the Terrible*, he writes, "praised it for presenting the viewer with a completely accurate game of chess, which leads unerringly to a solution of the problem as set out. Others say that it is brilliant chess — but nothing more. It must be that both are right"⁸.

As in the chess-like screenplay, the separation of contradictions from conclusions oversimplifies Eisenstein's concept of dialectics. Platt objects to my characterization of the film's narrative as "anything but" a clear cut story of epic achievements; he wants me to say that it is "both": that Ivan is both a glorious state-builder and a bloody tyrant, but here Platt's "both" is the simpler of our juxtapositions. As Luka Arsenjuk has shown so persuasively (and as is borne out in the spiral and fugue), Eisenstein's dialectics (his "unity of opposites" and his "inner conflicts") were often more than binary conflicts. What makes Eisenstein's work so controversial and difficult to interpret is that in addition to a dialectics of thesis and antithesis, his dialectics often juxtaposed duality on the one hand with something unitary on the other⁹. In what I call Eisenstein's double dialectic, the film maker often contrasts the dialectical contradictory with a unitary definitive, giving us neither a simpler dualism nor as Platt prefers "the undecidability of human history... the persistent absence of interpretive certainty" but a film that is about both "undecidability" and "certainty". The categorical doesn't cancel out the complex, together the categorical and the contested create another level of complexity.

And while I believe that it is perfectly reasonable to draw conclusions and make judgments from the evidence of our messy, shifting, contradictory world and its works of art, this process is a mutable, ongoing one. Confidence in my conclusions is not a sign of satisfaction at having arrived as the "true meaning"; few serious historians today (post-*Metahistory*), see our practice as the discovery of truth¹⁰. My

confidence is based on thinking through, and demonstrating in the text, the complicated questions Eisenstein raised in his writing in his film, and the various complex, at times contradictory, ways, they are answered.

Sometimes all we can see is the intractable, the contradictory, the inconclusive, the socially ambiguous, the morally murky, and the political dead-ends, but, then, a clear picture emerges, a formulation that captures what we believe or shows us how to act. Such clarity and resolution might be as ephemeral as Eisenstein's dialectical moments of transcendent, ecstatic, transformative synthesis, which immediately fracture into new dialectical oppositions. If such ideas momentarily reduce complexity in order to be articulated, so be it. But I prefer to think of these ideas and these moments as useful constructs, as real and as complex and as true as great fiction, and as necessary for us to make sense of the world, to live in the world. Eisenstein believed that the structures of works of art replicate the biological structures of mind that we use to understand works of art and by extension the world we see. In *This Thing of Darkness*, I tried to show that the search for "meaning" in Eisenstein (and in my reading of Eisenstein) was no simple path toward a definitive truth, but is something like the way we experience films: seeing, hearing, intuiting, sensing, learning, feeling, wondering, learning a little more, and eventually thinking through what we have seen and experienced in order to make it meaningful for us.

* The author wishes to thank Valerie Kivelson for her always astute comments.

¹ See: Bourdieu P. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London, 1986).

² Cited in: Healy D. "Sexuality and Gender Dissent: Homosexuality as Resistance in Stalin's Russia", *Contending with Stalinism: Soviet Power and Popular Resistance in the 1930s*, ed. by Lynne Viola (Ithaca, 2002), p. 157.

³ Eliot T. S. "Whispers of Immortality", Eliot T. S. *Poems* (London, 1919).

⁴ Eisenstein S.M. *Selected Works*, vol. IV: *Beyond the Stars: The Memoirs of Sergei Eisenstein* (London, 1995), p. 628; Eisenshtein S. *Yo: Memoirs*, in 2 vols (Moscow, 2019), vol. 2, p. 201.

⁵ Eisenstein S.M. *Beyond the Stars*, p. 37; Eisenshtein S. *Yo: Memoirs*, vol. 2, p. 27.

⁶ Eisenstein S.M. *Nonindifferent Nature*, ed. and transl. by Herbert Marshall (Cambridge, 1988), p. 36; Eisenshtein S.M. *Nonindifferent Nature*, in 2 vols (Moscow, 2006), p. 45.

⁷ On hunting and weaving, see: Eisenstein S.M. *Nonindifferent Nature*, p. 265–283; Eisenshtein S.M. *Caring Nature*, vol. II, pp. 372–394.

⁸ Eisenstein S.M. *Beyond the Stars*, p. 35; Eisenshtein S. *Yo: Memoirs*, vol. 2, p. 23.

⁹ Arsenjuk L. *Movement, Action, Image, Montage: Sergei Eisenstein and the Cinema in Crisis* (Minneapolis, 2018).

¹⁰ White H. *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, 1973), in which the author argues that the writing of history is not the "objective" chronicle historians once claimed it to be, but instead uses techniques similar to the writing of fiction in constructing narratives and characters based on the author's preconceptions, and constructed point of view.

FOR CITATION

Neuberger J. 'Response to Roundtable Comments', *Modern History of Russia*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2021, pp. 252–259. <https://doi.org/10.21638/11701/spbu24.2021.120>
UDC 94(47).084

Abstract: In her response, Neuberger elaborates and extends a few of her key arguments as discussed by Brandenberger, Kleiman, Petrone, Platt, and Tsivian. She focuses on questions involving Eisenstein's exceptionalism, the general reception of *Ivan the Terrible*, Stalin's response to the film and its homoeroticism, and fundamental questions about Eisenstein's interpretation of Ivan and his reign, its application to the present and to all rulers. She clarifies fundamental questions about Eisenstein's conception of dialectics, and shows his commitment to dialectics as something more than more than binary conflict. Eisenstein not only saw all phenomena as "unities of opposites", but contrasted the dialectical contradictory with a unitary definitive, giving us neither a simpler dualism nor a permanent state of contradiction. The categorical doesn't cancel out the contested (or vice versa): together the categorical and the contested create another level of complexity, making it possible to see *Ivan the Terrible* as a film that repeatedly poses questions about power, violence, and human perception, and a film that is a radical critique of Stalinism and Soviet ideology. The author underlines, that in *This Thing of Darkness* she tried to show that the search for "meaning" in Eisenstein (and in my reading of Eisenstein) was no simple path toward a definitive truth, but is something like the way we experience films: seeing, hearing, intuiting, sensing, learning, feeling, wondering, learning a little more, and eventually thinking through what we have seen and experienced in order to make it meaningful for us.

Keywords: Eisenstein, Ivan the Terrible, Stalin, cinema, Soviet, power, homoeroticism, reception, dialectics.

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Received: June 18, 2020

Accepted: October 27, 2020