Document Citation

Title	**Ivan the terrible**
Author(s)	
Source	*Publisher name not available*
Date	1965 Jan 29
Type	program note
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	4
Subjects	Eisenstein, Sergei (1898-1948), Riga (formerly Russia), Latvia
Film Subjects	Ivan groznyi (Ivan the Terrible, part 1), Eisenstein, Sergei, 1944

Program Notes

Exceptional Films at Art Museum

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BONUS PROGRAM

January 29, 1965

TONIGHT'S MUSIC: Overture to Act I, Boris Goudonov

IVAN THE TERRIBLE, Part I and Part II. Russia. 1944 and 1946.

Directed and written by Sergei Eisenstein. Music by Sergei Prokofiev. Photography by Edward Tisse and Andrei Moskvin.

It is fortunate that we can at last see the two Ivans in sequence, an event that a few years ago was impossible. Indeed, Ivan II had never been seen at all. By necessity, we should view the two works as one effort, for it was in that spirit that the films were made. But there are significant differences that will have to be brought out, and therefore we will have to discuss two films. Such is the duality of Ivan analysis.

Before such discussion, however, what of the man Eisenstein who made these films? Long-time EF subscribers will remember The Battleship Potemkin (1925), The Ten Days That Shook the World (1928), and Alexander Nevsky (1938). The first of these, Potemkin, is a crucial film in the history of cinema. It introduced revolutionary techniques and ideas, and brought to fruition theories developed previously only in Eisenstein's mind. And, as with many new forms and creative discoveries, they were accepted so wholeheartedly, and employed so successfully, that they have become cliches, and eschewed by many of the contemporary directors. In actuality, though, an examination of the writings of Eisenstein (which are voluminous) would reveal that an important part of the so-called "modern" directorial drift had foundations in Eisenstein's theories and experimentations. Although he wrote for a period of twenty-one years on the theories of film and art, he never realized his ultimate ambition--the series of ten books on such subjects as psychology and the film, painting and the film, etc. As it is, his writings themselves are explorations, and the reader gets the feeling of searching along with the author for the final answers to the many problems he poses. He was a passionate believer in the intellect, and this, finally, made him an outcast, both in commercial and enveloping Hollywood, and in his own communistic Russia.

In 1930 he came to the United States to work for Paramount. After working for a time on a script for Dreiser's American Tragedy it was rejected because it would have run for fourteen reels! All the rest of his efforts for that company were scrapped and Eisenstein moved on to Mexico where he worked on an American-financed film, which was never completed due to a worsening in relations with the producers. Returning to Russia, and a film on the conversion of land to State use, he was again disappointed when the film was discarded as being too formalistic. (Punishment for venturing to the West?) Intervention by the government again prevented other projects from bearing fruit. Incredible as it may seem, one of the world's better geniuses completed for viewing no works from 1929 until 1938, and then there was a six-year lapse until Ivan I in 1944. His death at the age of 49 came at the completion of his seventh major work.

Ivan was made during the war at the Alma Ata Studios behind the Urals in the Kazakh Republic of Central Asia. (If that fact in itself doesn't set a mood, the viewer must be considered stone!)

Eisenstein's original intent was that the entire story would be told in three biographical films, Part I was released, Part II held for a period of twelve years, and Part III was never made. Ivan I received the Stalin Prize at the time of its release.

The film's structure is episodic and is in seven main parts: (a) Ivan's coronation and challenge to the Boyars; (b) his wedding and quelling of an enemy-instigated riot; (c) the seige of Kazan; (d) Ivan's sickness and the Boyar disloyalty; (e) the dissolution of power and the poisoning of his wife by his aunt; (f) his sorrow and loss of followers; (g) retirement, and the popular call to return to power.

Political considerations aside, it must be borne in mind that Russia was at war when this was made, and one of the purposes of the film was the rousing of national spirit, and the portrayal and picturization of the great theme of Russian unification under a progressive monarch, and the final triumph against the nobility with the support of the common people.

The history of Part II is somewhat muddled. The story that seems to have held up longer than any of the others also seems to fit the facts as they are known. Upon the completion of Part II, when the film was shown for final approval, it was rejected as not showing the Czar as the progressive monarch he was, and it was charged that the film emphasized what was presumed to be Ivan's madness. The film (as the story goes) was intended in conception to draw parallels to the life and reign of Stalin and when the Party felt that this intended end was not being served, rejection was assured. End of Story. Now, the theories and imagination take over.

If Eisenstein was indeed trying to film a parallel to the Russian leader, it is felt that he would have been able to do so without any trouble--just as he made a highly sympathetic film of Potemkin (which was, in fact, a revolt against established authority). Some persons feel that Eisenstein weighted and molded the film as a hidden (but, at the most, ambiguous) protest against the Stalinist patterns that had emerged. This theory holds that Eisenstein misjudged the extent to which he had gone (not having intended to make various attitudes so explicit), and thereby ran into trouble.

Another theory holds that Eisenstein was guided by his emotions alone; that the resulting interpretation was a revelation of his subconscious feeling on the subject of power and tyranny. This idea might not be hard to buy, if Eisenstein were not the accomplished director he was, if he had not written so exhaustively on the problems of cinematic expression, and if he were not, after all, so acutely aware of the entire filmic "ball of wax."

A third idea suggests that there was confusion among the Party theoreticians as regards to the proper interpretations that were to be placed on the various characters, and that Eisenstein ultimately was caught between two diverging schools of thought--and chose the wrong one.

Be that as it is. Eisenstein died from a series of heart attacks shortly after the second part was completed. It is interesting, and saddening, to note a part of his "official" recantation:

"Like a bad sentry we gaped at the unessential and secondary things, forgetting the main things, and so abandoning our posts. We forgot that the main thing in art is its ideological content and historical truth...A stern and timely warning of the Central Committee stopped us Soviet artists from further movement along this dangerous and fatal way (!) which leads toward empty and non-ideological art for art's sake and toward creative degradation...In the second part of Ivan, we committed a misrepresentation of historical facts which made the film worthless and vicious in the ideological sense. The center of our attention is and must be Ivan-the-builder, Ivan-the-creator-of-a-new-powerful-unnoted-Russian-power, Ivan the inexorable destroyer of everything that resisted his progressive undertakings...I am accused of disfiguring historical truth and presenting Ivan as weak and indecisive, somewhat like Hamlet. This accusation is solidly grounded and just."

His life, unhappy and incompleted in its work and ambition, stands as a warning of what can happen to men of unusual talents who cannot be made to fit into the mold of Communist artistic policy. In 1951, the artistic line was laid down on the foundation of "socialist realism," an excerpt of which reads as follows: "Art loses all meaning as soon as it divorces itself from reality....in other words, reality existing outside of us is primary, and artistic reflection is secondary." Which accounts for much of the calendar art in Soviet fine arts.

In a monumental work from such a creative genius as Eisenstein, there are certain areas which deserve at least a nod in passing--for these areas are important to the structure and design of the piece, and, in some instances, they were pivotal points in cinematic continuity.

Eisenstein's use of sound in the two Ivans grew out of the experiments that he performed in Alexander Nevsky. One cannot divorce the sound from the image in films, and it is the creative and clever director who uses these sounds to reinforce his visuals or to otherwise mold and affect them. An examination of the use of bells in the film will illustrate a master hand at work.

There are small, lonely bells in the distance; great melancholy bells tolling overhead; bells are used to create the atmosphere of celebration, or to build an oppressive feeling and an expectation of impending doom, or to sculpt a religious feeling. Further exciting employment of sound is reflected in the voice of the Cantor echoing to the cathedral roof in the coronation scene, and in the cascade of coins poured over the newly-crowned Czar.

In the field of sound, but really deserving its own classification, is the musical scoring. Few directors can lay claim to having Prokofiev on their list of credits. Prokofiev had previously worked with Eisenstein on Alexander Nevsky: in fact, his cantata of that name was an outgrowth of his film experience, rather than the source of his inspiration. Prokofiev realized the importance of music in the cinematic medium and recognized the distinction between a score that merely supplements the visual action on a program music level, and music that reflects the spirit of the film and makes a creative addition to its artistic effect.

The sets of these two pieces are spectacular to behold. Eisenstein, always one to employ every device to serve his ends, worked on the Nevsky and Ivan sets himself. Accounts tell how he followed every step, and if the result did not fill his eye as the image had filled his imagination, the set came down and was rebuilt. His career started as a theatrical designer, and he carried this through most of his life. Every prop and every shadow (there are many) has its purpose: there was nothing left to chance, and nothing was accidental. The student of film design could profit much from an examination of Eisenstein's effects.

A very important, and at one time hotly disputed, aspect of these two works concern the style in which they are executed. The main stream of cinema at this time flowed toward the naturalistic rendering of plots and the ultimate result was, of course, the neo-realist movement. (Which is still bouncing around in the British "kitchen-sink" school.) Why then did this "great" director prefer to retain the simple, bolder, at times caricatured, style of the Russian silent film? Manvell wrote: "Stylization, provided it is based on a cinematic conception and technique, is as correct on the screen as it is in the static image on the painter's canvas. What is unnatural to the true expression of the cinema is its use as a mere recording medium dominated by words, or by lack of visual movement." Eisenstein's treatment is larger than life, like that of Greek and Shakespearean tragedy. The actors speak with a language that is archaic (even in the Russian) and they act with a technique that combines simplicity with grandeur. Eisenstein is concerned with theme rather than narrative (thus the episodic structure), human symbolism rather than individual characterization. The characters are grouped together, speak their words, or use mime to emphasize their

reaction to the situation. Always the effect is larger and simpler than actuality, and the technique has a parallel in the melodramas of Griffith. But, since the conception of Ivan is poetic and epic, the intent and design of the film is complex: the technical resemblance to the "mella" is superficial. He avoids what has been defined as follows: "To show things as they are, with nothing added for spice nor subtracted for propriety, is the sole aim of naturalism, the earnest, flatfooted school..."

James Agee wrote several years later of Eisenstein, in 1945, "This was the year in which Sergei Eisenstein once more got it in the eye. Part II of Ivan will never be released, Part III will never be made. Eisenstein was once more called a bourgeois and a formalist, and other words almost as dirty. Civilization has come a long way since the days when in Vienna, the High Altar of western music, Mozart and Schubert could die so young, largely for want of mere patronage. Today we appreciate our men of genius. In Russia we make corpses of them, living or genuine; here we drown them in cream." And in speaking (writing) of the acting style, Agee adds, "He goes boldly and successfully against naturalism...in the poisoning scene only opera singers could be so blind as to what is happening in plain sight...the chief cinematic device is a prodigal use of close-ups--but these are also used to enhance the anti-naturalism."

In Part II, when the lonely Ivan seeks the friendship and counsel of the Metropolitan of Moscow, he is repulsed and in his anger swears to crush all those who oppose him. This subtle change in the relations with the church from Part I probably reflects the difficulties that Eisenstein was having with the authorities. Why, in 1958, the Soviets should seek to release the film is somewhat vague. Their views on socialistic realism had not varied more than a mite, and one of the explanations would seem to be too much of an "in" reason: to wit, that the parallel to Stalin which had been rumored was indeed apparent, and the portrayal of Ivan-Stalin which in 1946, at the time of the banning, was described as contrary to fact and dishonest because it showed Ivan-Stalin not as a progressive statesman but as a maniac, had suddenly become useful for the purposes of the government.

There are differences from Part I, however, both in the acting, which seems to have donned a cloak of self-consciousness, and in the rhythm and pacing. There are critical complaints, probably justified, that whi le the pacing of II should really be stepped up, there is actually a slow-down from that of Part I. There is a greater reliance on the gesture and mime to elucidate the action, and as one reviewer noted, "when the method works, Eisenstein's scenes have the weight and majesty of grand opera at its grandest. When it does not, the picture is ludicrous. But even when it is ludicrous, it is mysteriously beautiful, and even when it is beautiful, it is horrible--as horrible as life in Ivan's or Stalin's Russia."

Whatever is the "true" Ivan--the historical Ivan--may never be known. The politically-motivated cinematic portrayal, serving as it did various persons, attitudes, and viewpoints, now in fashion, now fatally wrong, can only serve to muddy the waters. It is hoped that merely as a service to the historically curious, the true story may be told some day. One interesting sidelight comes from the work of Anthropologist-Sculptor Mikhail Gerasimov, a specialist in reconstructing appearances from bone structure. When Ivan was removed from his Kremlin tomb in 1963, Gerasimov examined his skeletal remains and reports that malformations of his spine must have caused crashing backaches every time Ivan either stood up or bent over. Which may account for his appelation.

As a cautionary note, it must be borne in mind that Part II as seen tonight has been edited, paced, and cut by others than Eisenstein and not always with the esthetics foremost in mind. Rather, political consideration entered into the final print as issued twelve years after Eisenstein's death.

NEXT PROGRAM: February 19, 1965--MONKEY IN WINTER, a whimsical film starring Jean Gabin and Jean-Paul Belmondo. And Georgie and the Dragon (UPA) and Happy Anniversary, a French satire.