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IVAN THE TERRIBLE

(U.S.S.R., 1944)

96 mins b&w sound Russian with English subtitles
Available: in the U.S.A.: Brandon Films (16mm)
 in Canada: Astral Films (35mm); New World
 Films (16mm)
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Written and Directed by Sergei Mikhailovich Eisenstein

Production: Mosfilm; Photography: Andrey Moskvin & Edward Tisse; Art
Direction: I. Shrimel; Music: Sergei Prokofiev; Costumes: L. Naumova;
Editing: S. M. Eisenstein.

Cast: Nicolai Cherkasov (Ivan the Terrible - Tsar Ivan IV of Russia); Ludmila
Tselikovskaya (Anastasia Romanovna); Serafima Birman (Euphrosyne
Staritskaya); Pavel Kadochnikov (Vladimir Staritsky); Mikhail Zharoy
("Grigory" afterwards Skuratov); Amvrosi Buchma (Alexey Basmanov);
Mikhail Kuznetsov (Fyodor Basmanov); Andrey Abrikosov (Boyar Fyodor
Kolychey); A. Mgebrov (Pimen, Archbishop of Novgorod); Maxim Makhailov
(An Archdeacon); V.I. Pudovkin (Nikola "Big-Fool", a beggar simpleton).

Political Background

The task the Soviet cinema set itself during the Second World War was to reveal the greatness of the epoch and its heroic people, and to inspire the nation to new deeds of courage. In this war, the Soviet Union was in a unique position in that it knew subjugation and freedom at one and the same time. While huge areas of its territory were occupied and millions of its people suffered persecution and degradation, the rest of the nation fought on and was free to speak. The cinema, therefore, in common with the rest of the arts, endeavoured to speak on behalf of the enslaved millions as well as for those in the rear and the Forces. National consciousness and pride found particularly forceful expression. "Participating in the most destructive war the world has known", wrote Sergei Gerasimov, "our people remain creative, for they fight the most creative idea of all the ideas that have made history. Hence their courage in battle, their inexhaustible patience, their strength in work".

The trend in the Soviet Union towards a revival in national consciousness, reflected in Alexander Nevsky, continued. Emphasis was laid on historical films which would inculcate a feeling of self-respect and strength in the Russian people. When war came, the people would require every material and psychological weapon with which to combat the enemy. And so, in response to this trend, Mosfilm, the Soviet film trust which had produced Nevsky, decided to produce a film on Ivan the Terrible. It was considered an important picture and Eisenstein was chosen to direct it. The film was placed on Mosfilm's Production schedule before the Germans turned eastward to attack the Soviet Union in 1941, and Eisenstein was granted leave from his post as a producer and as the artistic head of Mosfilm to work on the scenario. When Hitler's army approached Moscow in the autumn of 1941, Mosfilm evacuated its staff to Central Asia and continued production at Alma Ata, east of the Ural mountains.

Eisenstein had been interested in Ivan Grosny for many years, and had read many books about him in his childhood. In 1928, he had said that Ivan "as a personality in the manner of Edgar Allan Poe will hardly interest the young Soviet worker", though "as the creator of the linen trade, the Tsar who enriched and strengthened Russia's economic position, he becomes a more interesting figure. The story of Ivan the Terrible should go on to tell how he became absolute monarch, head of a dominant aristocratic class; it should tell of the struggle among the higher classes of society, how they became weakened. On this basis the story would be nearer reality and of more importance than a fantasy about a mephistophelian figure, a Tsar who was a wild beast". When he came to the subject again at the age of forty-three, his feelings had undergone a great change as a result of his experience and although what he said in 1928 was reflected in his original conception of Ivan, it only served as a base for one of the many levels of thought he was finally to develop in the film. In her biography of Eisenstein, Marie Seton explains how in the five years Eisenstein worked on Ivan, he fought the battles of his own soul in the person of Ivan, and upon completion of Part II, he suffered a stroke from which he never really recovered.

The Story

Ivan the Terrible had originally been planned as a trilogy, of which only the first two Parts were made. The second Part was judged by the Soviet authorities as unsatisfactory and has therefore never been seen. Part I, however is a complete film in itself but covers the early years only of Ivan's reign. In 1547, at the age of 17, he enters the Uspensky cathedral in the Kremlin and is crowned Tsar Ivan IV. He begins his reign with the determination to break the power of the Boyars, Russia's proud and independent feudal lords, and to unite the Russian lands under one ruler. Besides these enemies at home, Ivan has many enemies abroad, the Swedes and Livonians (Germans) who cut Russia off from Europe and the Mongols in the East. The film's structure is episodic and divides into seven narrative sections:

- 1). The Coronation sets the theme from the start, with cynical remarks of the ambassadors, and a heavy atmosphere of hostility among the

clergy and boyars, notably from Euphrosyne Staritskaya, Ivan's aunt and leader of the Boyars. At Ivan's right hand during the ceremony of pouring coins of tribute is Prince Kurbsky, a young noble whom Ivan regards as a friend but who joins his enemies in envy.

The crowning over, Ivan turns to the congregation and promises to break the power of the boyars and to raise a standing army. Those who cannot serve must pay for defence, notably the monasteries with their accumulated wealth.

- 2). The Marriage of Ivan to Anastasia Romanovna. This inflames further the envy of Kurbsky, who loves the new Tsarina. A peasant's riot incited by the boyars and led by Malyata Skuratov, interrupts the marriage celebrations, but Ivan obtains their support by promising to curb the oppressive power of the boyars. Into the hall strides an envoy of the Khan of Kazan with a challenge of mastery which Ivan accepts.
- 3). The Siege of Kazan. The battle is treated sketchily, bringing out three points: the loyalty of the common people, the growing tension between Kurbsky and Ivan, and the meeting of Ivan and Basmanov, his outspoken captain of artillery.
- 4). The Illness of the Tsar. Kazan is beaten, but upon his return, Ivan falls very ill. The court refuses to swear allegiance to his infant son and heir Dimitri. The boyars support Euphrosyne's half-wit son Vladimir Staritsky, whom they will be able to control. Ivan collapses, the boyars prepare to set up Vladimir and Kurbsky renews his approaches to Anastasia. But Ivan rallies from his illness. Kurbsky hastens to swear allegiance to Ivan and later Ivan elevates Basmanov above the boyars to command his armies.
- 5). Ivan's crumbling power and Anastasia's death. Headed by old Euphrosyne Staritskaya, the boyars refuse to support Ivan's wars with the Livonians and Tartars, despite his appeal to the memory of great battles of the past. An ambassador is then sent by Ivan to Elizabeth of England, requesting supplies be sent through the White Sea to avoid the German blockade of the Baltic, and offering to open the way for English trade with the East. An elaborate chess set is his gift to her.

The boyars now strike at Ivan through Anastasia, on whom he relies in his isolation. Euphrosyne arranges a poisoned cup with which Ivan causes his wife's death.

- 6). Ivan's mourning. Weighted down with treachery and Kurbsky's desertion, Ivan is prostrate by his wife's bier. Skuratov, the peasant leader now captain of the guard, and Basmanov try to rouse him, urging an "iron ring" of loyal common people. He rejects the notion of returning to Moscow to beat the boyars by force, and resolves to leave. He will return only if petitioned by the people. "Then will my might be the people's might, and I shall be uncontested master of all Russia".

- 7). The petition of the people. In his retreat, a monastery at Alexander Sloboda near Moscow, the people approach Ivan to return. Heartened in spirit and purpose, he agrees to do so, "For the sake of the great Russian Empire".

Style

In "The Film and the Public", Roger Manvell writes: "Eisenstein's treatment of this large historical theme is deliberately larger than life, like that of Greek and Shakespearean tragedy. The characters speak a language which is archaic and stylized, and they act with a technique which combines simplicity with grandeur, in the very opposite tradition to the detailed naturalism of most contemporary cinema. Eisenstein is concerned with theme rather than individual characterization. Each episode is conceived like a book from an epic poem or a section from a Greek tragedy: the characters are grouped together, speak their words and, especially where speech is minimized or altogether absent, use mime to emphasize their reactions to the situation. Always the effect is both larger and simpler than actuality, and the technique has a certain parallel to that of the melodrama of the days of Griffith. Yet since the conception of Ivan the Terrible is poetic and epic, the intention and total design of the film is complex. The technical resemblance to melodrama is superficial only.

"The outstanding figure in the film is that of Nikolai Cherkasov as Ivan. His appearance and voice lend themselves to the purposes of Eisenstein. He portrays the Tsar as a creature of single moods according to the needs of the situation; he is angry, happy challenging, loving, hating, mourning. He acts on the grand scale with ease and deliberation, powerful but never melodramatic because his largest moments are born of intense feeling. He is never submerged by the almost mathematical complexity of Eisenstein's sense of design. Euphrōsyne is a hawk-figure, compact of evil, bending stealthily under the low doorways, sinister and watchful. Kurbsky is handsome, empty and vacillating. Only the Tsarina seems to lack the grandeur of the symbolism implied by her position: she underplays too much in the tradition of realistic cinema."

According to his friend and collaborator Grigori Alexandrov, Eisenstein was singularly disinterested in his actors: his only concern was the imagery they were able to create. As he recorded while at work and later in FILM FORM - "Cherkasov's incomparably lithe and flexible body will practise long and tiringly to produce the tragic bend of Tsar Ivan's figure so spontaneously fixed on paper (in Eisenstein's own drawings) as camera set-ups. In intent these drawings are no more (but also no less) than those Japanese paper toys that, when cast into warm water, unfold and develop stems, leaves and flowers of fantastic and surprising shape."

Such a method of work took a tremendous toll of the emotions of his actors, particularly those of Nikolai Cherkasov, whose own style of acting was essentially realistic. Cherkasov is said to have been in a state of nervous exhaustion when the second part of Ivan the Terrible was completed.

Sergei Prokofiev again collaborated with Eisenstein on the musical score and joined Eisenstein in Alma Ata in the summer of 1942. In his biography of Prokofiev, Israel Nestyev says; "In the international history of the art of the sound film there is no closer creative friendship between director and composer than that between Eisenstein and Prokofiev... Prokofiev was thrilled by Eisenstein's temperament and by his graphic skill in directly or paradoxically formulating his "orders" to the composer: "At this point the music must sound like a mother tearing her own child to pieces", or "Do it so that it sounds like cork rubbed down a pane of glass". In his turn Eisenstein more than once listened profitably to the keen comments of Prokofiev. "As in Alexander Nevsky, the music was to occupy the role of an active participant in the drama, and was not only to accompany the more important episodes in the film, but also to fill it with a parallel, developing action of emotional sound."

Nowhere better than in Ivan is the collaborative element in the art of the film better illustrated: the cameras of Moskvina (interiors) and Tisse (exteriors), the music of Prokofiev, the sets (by Eisenstein himself), all produce an astonishingly collective result; the combined powers of photography, music and montage emerge in the all-embracing film medium. Dr. Manvell gives an example of this in the carefully constructed coronation sequence "in which long shots of the whole cathedral are alternated with remarkable portrait close-ups, the heads of the chief actors, and the heads, framed in gigantic white ruffs, of the old and cunning ambassadors of Western Europe. Ivan is crowned without emphasis on the individual, the back of his head and his hands receiving the symbol of office are all that are shown. A bass voice of an astonishing quality rises in quarter tones with a paean of thanksgiving. The Emperor turns and the ritual shower of coins is poured over his head and splashes to the ground in a stream of dancing light. The women smile and the huge menacing heads of the Boyars threaten the young Tsar. Only after all this play with music, ritual and symbolic portraiture does Ivan announce his challenge to the old powers in plain and ringing speech.

"Throughout the film these sequences recur in which pattern and design become motifs to enlighten the theme of the film. The heavy claustrophobic Byzantine buildings with their formalized images of God and Man are the background to intense court intrigue. The marriage celebrations become a pageant of moving designs, the crash of the huge goblets of wine seen through a perspective of ornamental curving swan-necks, the rich barbaric ceremonial shattered by the peasant invasion which calls Ivan to action as the leader of his people, and turns revolt into friendly laughter. But always there are the great shadows and all-enclosing walls to hem in the free spirit of the Tsar and bind him to the intrigues of the ancient ways. The siege of Kazan is also a matter of patterned imagery like the Iliad portrayed on a Greek vase. The Tsar, the leader of his people, emerges from his rich tent on the crest of a curving hill, and he stands alone, a dark heroic figure, whilst the line of his officers is ranged in a pattern beneath him. His troops in procession march in a rhythm of moving lines. There is no realism in this portrait of an army, only the order and precision of an artist's mobile composition. Even the terrible moment of agony for the Mongolian prisoners,

shot through by the arrows of their countrymen loosed from the walls of besieged Kazan, is an agony emphasized by the artistry of the close shots, the pain of death enlarged by the formal angles of the dead men's bound and twisted bodies.

"The tolling of varying deep bells recurs through the film, at the coronation, at the wedding ceremony, and at the Tsar's supposed deathbed. Their religious symbolism of sound enriches the Byzantine ikons, and books of the priests, and the painted images on the walls. Life and art combine in the film. The huge heads of the actors turn slowly in significant close-up and merge with the watchful heads and eyes in relief, or paint which stare down on the living from the vantage ground of art. The sardonic climax of this religious ritual is when the sick Tsar peers suspiciously from under the pages of the huge illuminated Testament placed over his face by the Archbishop. Always the symbolism of objects merges into the symbolism of people. In Ivan's palatial study the shadow of the skeletal globe stands in huge relief on the wall while he discusses his foreign policy with his envoy to the British Queen Elizabeth I.

"In the last scenes the symbolism of locality is uppermost. In the foreground the self-exiled Tsar stands watching the vast procession of the common people who have come to intercede with him. The procession itself spreads over a vast plain. The claustrophobia of the intriguing court is forgotten in the open sunshine which lights the great curving line of people who kneel to the Tsar. The film ends, therefore, on a note of triumph in which Ivan and his people are joined under the open skies of Russia."

Quotations from the Critics

"Alexandre Nevsky est un film parlant ou l'on ne parle pas. Ivan le Terrible est un film parlant ou l'on parle et même ou l'on parle beaucoup trop.... Cette parole, d'autre part, fait double emploi étant donné que les acteurs prennent les attitudes de circonstances, gesticulent grimacent, appuient leurs dires ou leurs sentiments selon les meilleurs habitudes de la pantomime ou d'un nouvel expressionisme. La musique de Prokofiev toute seule aurait suffi. Les idées masses, les lignes générales qu'exprime l'image se passent de ce commentaire parlé... Quel ques sous-titres auraient mieux fait l'affaire...

"Mais, si le film est irréprochable dans sa plastique, révélatrice comme les autres oeuvres d'Eisenstein de l'esthétique cinématographique la plus élevé, il n'en reste pas moins que la trame dramatique nous paraît rudimentaire et que la psychologie de cette histoire est très inférieure à l'image.... Aussi bien, au delà de la propagande, au delà de la discipline et à travers une oeuvre top lourde, souvent confuse, parfois monotone, Ivan le Terrible reste-t-il le véhicule d'une idée qui paraît aujourd'hui curieuse et quasi démodée la grandeur. C'est pour être, dans ce premier age de l'épopée cinématographique, l'artisan de cette valeur périmée et pur être aussi, par un sens aigu de la sensualité et de la poésie de l'image, le grand imagier de l'écran que Serge Michel Eisenstein continue de partager avec quelques autres, une royauté incontestable."

Jacques Doniol-Valcroze dans "La Revue du Cinéma"

"Moskvin, the greatest pictorialist among cameramen, created with Eisenstein the most interesting and valuable stylized film in Ivan the Terrible. The real content of this demoniacally monumental musical-pictorial symphony is not the story of Ivan the Terrible but a revelation of the terrifying medieval Pravoslav-Orthodox Gothic spirit and superstition in pictures that are like odd icons come to life. In this film the stylisation has reached a culminating point."

Bela Balazs in "Theory of the Film"

"It is a great change and, many critics will feel, a great comedown from Eisenstein's early films. Nonetheless, it is obviously, and in every frame, the work of a great creative intelligence.... Actually the film is a visual opera, with all of opera's proper disregard of prose-level reality. As such, it is an extraordinarily bold experiment, fascinating and beautiful to look at. But Eisenstein has denied himself so much that is native to the cinema and has concentrated so fiercely on political pedagogy that the film is also tiring and disappointing."

"Time" - 14th April, 1947

"Eisenstein's elaborate theories of direction outlined in his book 'The Film Sense' are synthesised in this picture: a classical tragedy whose artistic and technical brilliance will find few rivals."

Norman Mackenzie in "The New Statesman"

"Over and over again the screen images are unforgettable... But exciting images do not make a film... (It) tends to be static and the dynamic editing which was once the hallmark of Eisenstein's work is almost entirely lacking."

Basil Wright in the "Spectator"

"L'oeuvre est comme stratifiée dans une suite d'images prodigieuses qui ramènent tout à leur seule composition. Chacune d'elle est un chef-d'oeuvre pictural mais le rythme est absent, le courant ne passe pas. La continuité n'est qu'un défilé monotone de splendeurs tendues vers la noblesse et la gravité hiératiques. C'est moins un film, au sens dramatique du mot, qu'une cérémonie religieuse."

Jean Mitry dans "S.M. Eisenstein"

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And many other books and articles.

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