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And despite all the humiliating taunts – perhaps as the only form of resistance against them – Eisenstein threw himself once more into his creative work. Several years later he was to recall with irony the 'grey atmosphere' of the early 1930s and the attempt to force everyone into a straitjacket of creative conformity. His own apparent conformity at the time was thus clearly a surface one only.

Bezhin Meadow

Shortly after the conference, Eisenstein began work on a sound film, *Bezhin Meadow*. It meant interrupting his lectures, but four of his students joined him as apprentice directors, among them Jay Leyda, who kept a production diary throughout much of the protracted activity on the film until his return in 1936 to the United States, where he became an enthusiastic propagator of Eisenstein's theories and later translator and editor of his works.

The scenario, commissioned by the Communist Youth League on the theme of the Young Pioneers' contribution to collective farm work, was written by Alexander Rzheshevsky. Inspired by Turgenev's story set in the village of Bezhin Lug, Rzheshevsky had gone to stay there with the intention of drawing a comparison between the peasant children in the classic and those of his own time. After two years there he had written a script based on Turgenev's tale and on the true-life story of a young village hero, Pavlik Morozov. Morozov – who becomes the Stepok of the scenario – had organized the pioneers to keep a night watch over the collective farm harvest, thereby frustrating the plans of his kulak father to sabotage it. By so doing, Stepok provoked him to such a pitch of uncontrollable fury that he killed his son. In the scenario, the whole action takes place in twenty-four hours, from the morning of one day until the following day of harvesting.

Rzheshevsky's was an 'emotional scenario' – one, that is, which, as well as telling a story, aims more particularly to give the director an 'emotional stimulus'. It thus accorded with Eisenstein's ideas, recorded some years earlier, that

> the scenario is not merely a dramatic narrative . . . nor does it represent the staging of a subject but one step in its processing. . . . The scenario is a cipher through which the transfer of one temperament to another is effected.[8]

Eisenstein now took Rzheshevsky's dramatic basis and, passing it through the filter of his own artistic temperament, gave it his own particular interpretation – recorded in a multitude of sketches of the compositional ideas, the costumes, settings, gestures and even abstract concepts relating to the film. All told, he was delighted with the scenario, especially its simplicity, which he intended preserving in his film, describing it as one 'about children and adults for adults and children'.[9] But, of course, Eisenstein's creative process was not a simple one: during the gestation period, his initial ideas always ramified as rapidly and uncontrollably as the luxuriant tropical Mexican vegetation. Or so it seemed; in point of fact, the apparently haphazard ideas fell strictly into place along the central guide lines of a mathematically precise conception that he followed through unwaveringly to the end. Even more amazingly, however total his apparent absorption in his idea for the film, he always had the energy – and indeed the need – simultaneously to pursue other, different interests, be they theoretical abstractions or quite simply other film projects.

As usual, Eisenstein set about casting with extreme thoroughness, particularly for the role of Stepok. From 2,000 boys his assistants selected 600 'possibles', whom Eisenstein personally whittled down to 200 in the course of twice-weekly sessions of four hours each. Still Stepok had not been found. Suddenly, at one of the final sessions, Eisenstein caught sight of Vitka Kartashov. 'He *is* Stepok,' he exclaimed to the astonishment of everyone present. The boy, as Jay Leyda relates,

> seemed to have everything (and everyone, including Rzheshevsky) against him: his hair grew in the wrong way, insufficient pigmentation of the skin gave him great white blotches on his face and neck, and at the test his voice grew stiff and dull – until he was told to ask us riddles, when he produced a clear, fine, almost compelling voice. Only E. was able at once to see the positives, later clear to all.[10]

For some of the roles he chose actors, among them Boris Zakhava, director of the Vakhtangov Theatre, and four other theatre directors. In the main, however, he was faithful to his 'typage' concept, giving the role of grandmother, for instance, to an old woman found in an old people's home.

Parallel with the casting, a search was going on for suitable filming locations, as Bezhin Lug itself was unsatisfactory. Eisenstein drew up a map of a 'synthetic village' and sent out parties to scour for sites incorporating one or other of the various features required for the film. Meanwhile, on 5 May 1935, shooting began in Moscow on the film's prologue.

Eventually, on 15 June, at six in the morning, Eisenstein left Moscow by aeroplane with six of his team and all their equipment en route for Armavir and the Stalin State Farm near the Sea of Azov – their first location. As he set about filming, it was with precise ideas and a distinct vision of what he wanted to achieve. This was to be Eisenstein's first sound film and he was evidently bent on applying the fruits of his earlier theoretical meditations. Although without sound equipment at Armavir – it was to come into use only at the next location, Kharkov – he took meticulous account of the sound factor throughout the shooting. As he explained to his fellow workers:

> On the editing table this episode will be handled in the same way a composer works on a fugue in four voices. The material we're filming here is only one of the voices.

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Most of it will be used for rear-projection and transparencies when the second voice will be worked out – with figures and close-ups in the foreground. . . . The third and fourth voices (or motifs) are in sound – sound and speech.[11]

The whole audio-visual structure of the film was aimed at the ultimate realization of 'a sound film expressive of a specific artistic form and of a psychological interpretation of reality'. And every scene took account of this aim, as also did the décor: in the lines of exaggerated perspective for the interior of Stepok's home, for instance, or in the deliberately stylized, polished gold interior of the church.

'All the culture of the world', Jay Leyda relates, was brought into play for every new problem. For the compositions in which Eisenstein wanted to show '*how* Turgenev saw the things around him', he analysed Turgenev's literary style in minute detail, delving into his sources of inspiration and his creative method, for which he then sought suitable plastic equivalents. Consequently in one sequence 'the listening, waiting villagers assume the postures, even the sharp lighting of the listening, waiting disciples in the paintings of the late Spaniards'; elsewhere

the blanket arranged over the face of the dead mother reminds you of the death masks of Negro sculpture. A gorgeous embroidery brings along with it the composition of a Vermeer. Thus there are places in the film where an encyclopedic culture has been so integrally welded into cinematography that they remind you of nothing but Eisenstein.[12]

With this film, too, as with his Mexican film, Eisenstein aimed at 'a revival "in a new quality" of film poetry'.

The film also contained emotional echoes from Eisenstein's own life, not least in the basic theme itself – the father–son relationship that turns up again and again in Eisenstein's films (and projects), and whose emotional source is always patently clear. In this respect there was a grain of truth in Shumyatsky's later maliciously critical article in which he attempted to justify his brutal quashing of the film. From the first episodes filmed, according to Shumyatsky, Eisenstein had demonstrated that he was treating the events in a subjective and arbitrary way. But the real target of Shumyatsky's fury was Eisenstein's marvellously effective and widely admired techniques. Eisenstein's characterizations, for instance, depended on 'a metaphor concerning the centrifugal character of unleashed elemental forces', and Stepok's father, 'instead of being endowed with the features of the real enemy, appears like a mythological Pan from the paintings of the symbolist Vrubel'. Still more blasphemous from the Communist viewpoint, the central figure of Stepok was presented 'in luminously pale tones, with the face of a consecrated holy child. . . . In some of the shots, the source of light is placed behind Stepok so that this blond child in a white shirt seems to radiate a halo.'[13]

Generally speaking, the filming progressed well, Tisse, inspired by Eisenstein's plastic imagination, exploring the most expressive angles and compositions. Eisenstein's working relationship with the actors, however, was sometimes far from cordial, mainly because of his practice of keeping them in ignorance of the scene to be shot until just beforehand, and then only briefly outlining their movements. He used them as just one plastic element in the shot, without putting undue emphasis on their acting. This, and his deafness to the consequent complaints, was to be a frequent source of reproach. Meanwhile, in smoothing down frictions Eisenstein gratefully accepted the help of Elisabeta Teleshova, who was after to continue as his casting adviser and close personal friend.*

Work was intensive, with shooting from six in the morning till seven at night, when the unit retired to their hotel to discuss the day's work and plan the next. Eisenstein was determined to keep up to schedule and constantly recalled the experience of *Potemkin*:

'Well, have we come up to the record set during *Potemkin* when seventy-five shots were made in one day's filming on the steps?' 'No, but forty-five . . . is also pretty good.' 'Not good enough, not good enough. Don't let the old battleship shame us.'[14]

To film the acted sequences of the 'Highway' episode – only the biggest mass scenes were shot at Armavir – the unit later moved to Kharkov. During the move, Eisenstein paid what was intended to be a flying visit to Moscow, only to go down with ptomaine poisoning which delayed his return. This was the first of a series of misfortunes that were to dog the film from then onwards. On arriving at Kharkov, though only half recovered, he launched straight into the highway episode which, being the climax and the most complicated part of the film, he wanted to complete so as to construct the rest around it. In the episode two militiamen dislodge four incendiarists from their barricaded hide-out and lead them off to the city jail. On the highway the incendiarists attempt to escape but are recognized by the enraged farm-workers, who threaten to take the law into their own hands. At this point Stepok intervenes and relieves the tension of the situation with a joke, after which the saboteurs are again led off quietly. After the shooting of this episode one day the four incendiarists were hustled off to Kharkov airport

* The Teleshova in question was Elisabeta Sergeyevna Teleshova, often referred to in error as Elena. From one of Eisenstein's unpublished letters in the Elisabeta Teleshova archive at the Moscow Art Theatre Museum it clearly emerges that she was Eisenstein's mistress. In another, written to the local administration, he introduces Teleshova as 'my wife'. The apparent bigamy – for he had previously, it seems, married Pera Attasheva (Fogelman) – is explained by the fact that the matrimonial laws, which up to the 1940s were rather liberal, accepted as legal any *de facto* marital relation. Teleshova died during the war years (having appointed Eisenstein as her heir); and Attasheva remained Eisenstein's legal wife and, after his death, heiress – although they had always lived in separate places.

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where, much to the astonishment of the onlooking unit, they were filmed in the slipstream from the propellers. But there was really no mystery: for, in the scene where the farm-workers recognize the saboteurs and express their fury in whistles and catcalls, Eisenstein envisaged the sound-track becoming progressively less realistic; he wanted gradually to eliminate all sound except for the whistling, which was to crescendo until finally merging into the wail of ships' sirens and factory whistles. The visual imagery had to keep pace with the sound-track, and so the script indicates filming the four first 'under a high wind' and then 'as in a hurricane'. The metaphor is sustained for some considerable time, and later in the scene, after Stepok has cracked his joke, the fields, sky and trees are shown reverberating under the gales of laughter.

Eisenstein also gave meticulously detailed attention to the frame compositions: sometimes, before allowing shooting to begin, he carefully arranged the position of each one of Stepok's fingers, the creases in his shirt, and even individual strands of hair.

During the spring Eisenstein had chosen a field near Moscow and had personally supervised its sowing with wheat in readiness for the filming due to begin there in the autumn. But heavy local rainfall had ruined the crops, and every time wheat grain was needed it had to be brought from the studio's properties store. The scene to be filmed there was Stepok's death. At the crack of dawn every morning, Stepok had to be lying stretched out, as if dead, in time for the cameras to catch the first few minutes of daybreak when the light was just right. In the eeriness of the morning mist, with Eisenstein issuing his instructions in a subdued whisper, Stepok's 'death' was sometimes so realistic that the onlookers were hushed into a tense silence. In view of their numbers, this was some achievement; for Eisenstein's friends and colleagues, including Kuleshov, Ermler, Savchenko, Barnet, Trauberg, Esther Shub and the Vasiliev brothers, as well as foreign visitors and tourists, all trooped out daily to the shooting. The veritable ballet enacted every time, under Eisenstein's magic direction, the equipment that had to be moved – and the crowd of onlookers with it – was a spectacle in itself.

Filming continued afterwards in the studio, the sound sequences by night. The first of these was the shooting of Stepok, in which the enraged father's hysterical madness mounts through a sort of animal dementia to a culminating violent paroxysm of fury. Again, the tension among the audience at times reached an unbearable pitch – until one of the perpetual jokes exchanged between Eisenstein and the young Stepok abruptly shattered the suspense. At other times, nothing would keep the boy awake, and the clearly recognizable snores that suddenly issued through the microphone would startle the unsuspecting sound operator out of his concentration.

In the course of filming, Eisenstein had at last been allocated new accommodation in a four-roomed flat at Potylika, which he finished furnishing by September. At the same time a dacha was being built for him just outside Moscow.

Towards the end of October, when more than half of the filming had been completed, Eisenstein went down with smallpox, probably contracted while rummaging through the property boxes for old costumes. As the only known case in Moscow for two years, it represented yet another piece of atrocious bad luck. Three weeks of quarantine followed, during which daily radio bulletins on his health were issued, since his heart condition was also, apparently, causing concern. Nevertheless he kept up his spirits, as appears from a jocular letter to Marie Seton about 'them poxes'.[15] There followed a protracted convalescence, spent in a sanatorium in the Caucasus. Eisenstein nonetheless intended finishing the film by May 1936 – an intention soon frustrated when he caught a particularly virulent type of influenza that kept him in bed for his thirty-eighth saint's day.

After this second long absence, Eisenstein was forced to revise the scenario on orders from Shumyatsky, who had meanwhile expressed his dissatisfaction with the film so far shot. Thus his illnesses created new problems; for, in Jay Leyda's opinion, 'if his original schedule had been met the film might have been finished without major crisis and judged as a whole'.[16] As it was, Eisenstein now called on Isaac Babel's help for the revisions demanded by official policy changes. He greatly admired Babel and had invited him to speak to his students at the Institute – the same Babel who had once commented that 'to write a scenario is like summoning the midwife on the wedding night'.[17] Shooting was resumed in the autumn, but yet more revisions were to follow.

Despite a number of alterations to the plot, Eisenstein did not abandon his basic vision of the film. In its first form, the characters were – according to Shumyatsky –

> not images of collective farmers, but biblical and mythological types. Eisenstein even hit upon the clever idea of portraying the chief of the political department as a man with an immobile face, enormous beard and the conduct of a biblical Saint.[18]

As for the 'smashing the church' episode, this was 'a veritable bacchanalia of destruction'. In the new version modified to meet Shumyatsky's demands, the history of the first production, in his opinion, repeated itself: the bacchanalia of destruction in the church was replaced by the bacchanalia of fire in the granary-firing episode, while the film's conception was again based on 'a clash of elemental forces of nature, on a struggle between "good" and "evil" '.

Lion Feuchtwanger, who saw the fire sequence soon after it was filmed, recalls Eisenstein's anxiety lest, even at that point, cuts would be demanded. Eisenstein also foresaw a number of other difficulties looming up in the future, which appeared even blacker as Babel gradually became marked down as a victim of the cultural purge.

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In the meantime, however, filming continued. In January 1937 Eisenstein again succumbed to influenza, but in a letter to Leyda dated 1 February he expressed hopes of finishing the film in 'three–four weeks'. The same letter is interesting for revealing Eisenstein's continued interest in Western cultural life, despite the chilly political atmosphere. Even more revealing is the astonishing confession that with Leyda's departure he no longer had anyone with whom to discuss his theoretical ideas.

> Most of the time with you I was petty and disagreeable – but that was a sort of self-protection against . . . oneself: against things that drive me mad – things I cannot put down in book form being chained to producing other things! You were allways [*sic*] provoking and touching my most secret wounds – *the* side of my work which is to my opinion the really most important of what I have to do – and which I am not doing . . . and when I by accident jump out of production for an hour or so, I feel like Peer Gynt in the scene where he watches the rush of leaves on the earth which happen to be his ideas that never got form.[19]

It was a strange confession, coming from an artist in the full fever of creation, that his *raison d'être* was to be a theoretician. Equally illuminating is the implication that he was now putting his theories into practice. The confession explains a lot about the genesis of his work and its experimental character. His creative fire linked up with his intellectual thinking and was nourished by it in a complex way that recalls Leonardo da Vinci.

After three weeks in bed, Eisenstein resumed work at the beginning of March 1937. On 17 March, however, Shumyatsky, who was to be deposed less than a year later as 'a tool of political enemies', finally vetoed the film, publishing the malicious article in *Pravda* which has already been quoted. At this point the film disappeared without trace, and was rumoured to have been destroyed without Eisenstein's knowledge.* Subsequently all reference to the film was forbidden; even a whispered mention of it was risky. Thus two years' creative work was brought to nothing, thanks, as Vishnevsky put it, to 'continued efforts of enemies and saboteurs'.

* Thanks to Eisenstein having saved a few frames from each shot, Naum Kleiman was able to reconstruct his main ideas for the film: not only the structure of the missing film, but also the modifications imposed on the second version. The official story is that the working-copy as well as the negatives were deposited in an underground shelter, and that during the war water penetrated into the shelter and destroyed all the films in it. There seems to be no concrete evidence, however, that the film was destroyed; it has been stated on good authority that Eisenstein's montage assistant handed it over one night to a chauffeur from the Ministry of Cinema, whence all trace of it was lost. The *montageuse*, however, whose good faith I have no reason to doubt, maintains that Eisenstein once told her that he had hidden a copy so thoroughly that no one would be able to find it; her supposition was that he had it buried in the grounds of his dacha, though no attempt to verify this has been made. A number of other indications – none of which may be revealed at the present time – lead me to believe that somewhere there exists a copy which will, I hope, one day come to light.

There followed, on 19–21 March, a conference staged with the evident purpose of condemning Eisenstein, the outcome of which was a long and complicated self-criticism published as a brochure along with other critical comment on the film. Esther Shub relates that on 20 July Eisenstein sent her a copy on which he had written in red ink 'to my dear friend, Esther', and sketched the palm of a hand.

> The artistic line was traced on the palm with several breaks in it, and beside it the comment: 'ha, ha'. The line of destiny – an arrow and again 'ha, ha'.[20]

Bezhin Meadow was, in Eisenstein's own words, 'one of the most bitterly painful experiences in my creative life'.[21]

Meanwhile, in June, Léon Moussinac had found him greatly changed and resolutely unwilling to discuss the political climate, although at the same time keeping up an outward appearance of calm.

It was probably faith in himself and his artistic mission that kept Eisenstein going; that, and his opinion, committed to paper in connection with Meyerhold's fate, that 'a dose of philistinism ensures peace and stability, the in-rooting and pleasure of dedication, while the lack of it condemns a hyper-romantic nature to eternal anxieties, troubles, and ups and downs, to the vicissitudes of fate, to the destiny of Icarus, whose path through life is identical with that of the Flying Dutchman'.[22] This seems to provide a clue to what is otherwise something of a mystery: how Eisenstein survived when heads all around him were rolling, including those of his friends Tretyakov, Meyerhold and Babel. In 1936 and 1937 rumours of his arrest were rife abroad, though he himself denied them in an article in *Izvestia* of 8 February 1937. The most plausible explanation appears to be Stalin's arbitrariness when it came to deciding where the axe should fall next. His weakness for films is well known, and the cinema was apparently the only cultural sphere in which no outstanding figure was liquidated. In addition, Stalin seems to have had a special sympathy for Eisenstein himself, as their many meetings suggest and as Eisenstein's personal notebooks – which reportedly describe the exact nature of their relationship – may well be found to confirm. (Permission to publish or even consult them is persistently refused.) It thus seems likely that Eisenstein's abject self-criticisms represented that 'dose of philistinism' necessary to secure, not merely his 'peace and stability' but his actual physical survival. They were almost certainly not a sign of cowardice, his tortuous and sophisticated self-criticisms in connection with *Bezhin Meadow* having rather a ring of irony about them. In an article on his staging of *The Valkyrie*, published in 1940, he described 'the twilight of the Gods' as symbolizing 'the death of the whole "world of murder and plunder, legalized by falsehood, deceit and hypocrisy" '[23] – a somewhat gratuitous synopsis which many have interpreted as his comment on the contemporary Soviet scene. In any case the

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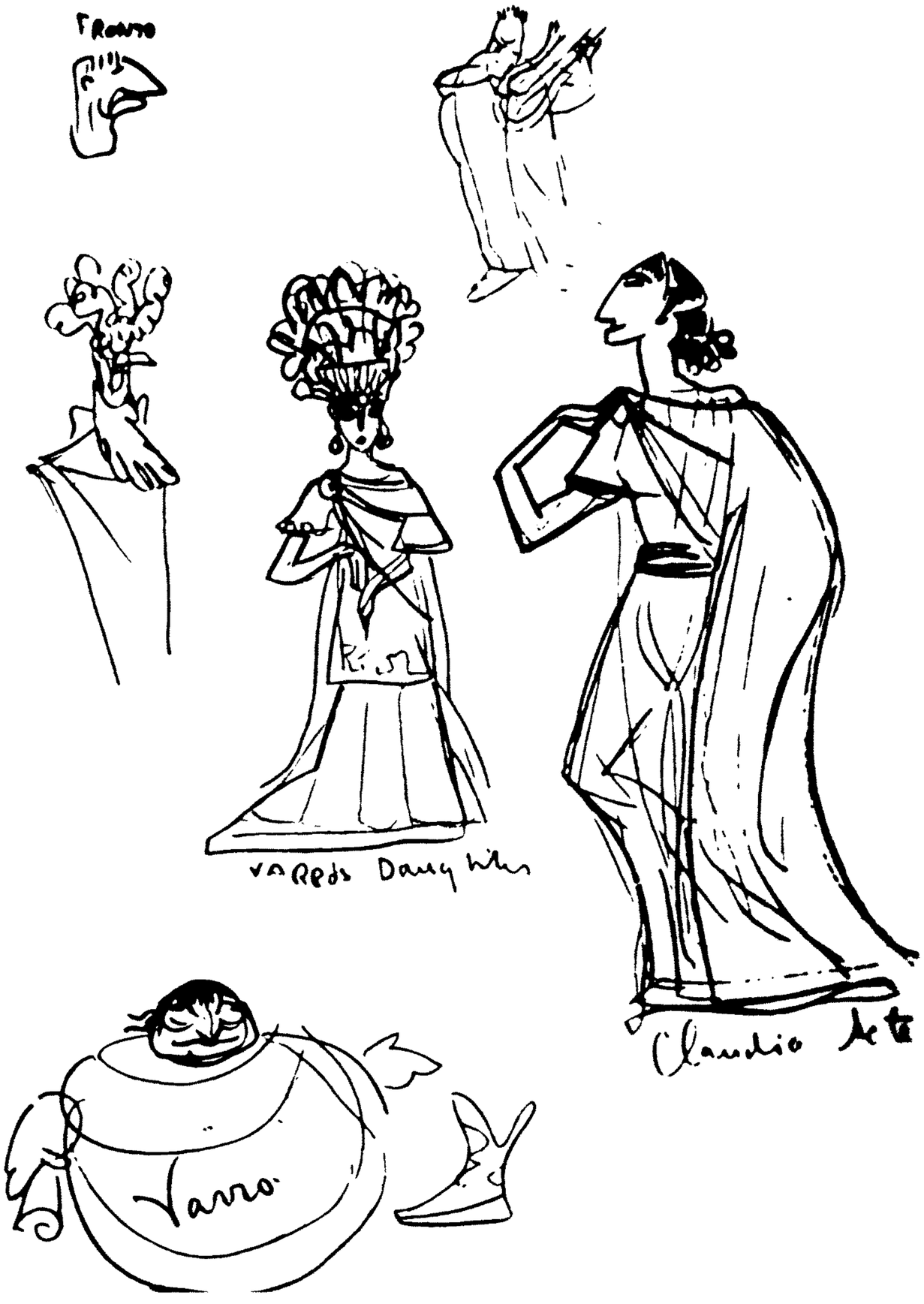

fact remains indisputable: that his compromises were restricted to words and did not affect his creative activities. They were, if you like, a form of struggle for the survival of his work.

Other Projects

Apart from his real friends, the only prominent cultural figure who stood by Eisenstein at this difficult period seems to have been Fadeyev, who sent an admiring and encouraging letter begging Eisenstein not to pay overmuch attention to the slanders and attacks, and ending up: 'I clasp you warmly, warmly by the hand.'[24] It did much to restore Eisenstein's morale, and marked the beginning of a close friendship between them; in moments of trouble Eisenstein was frequently to seek Fadeyev's company and to include him among the few people he addressed by the familiar form.

Far from giving way before the implacable onslaught which – almost like the recurrent theme of his films – threatened to crush him, Eisenstein, encouraged in all probability by Shumyatsky's removal, was, in fact, preparing new projects. Even while he was working on *Bezhin Meadow*, two projects were in the wind. One was the *Black Consul* idea, revived by Robeson's arrival in Moscow for a concert tour and his promise to be at Eisenstein's disposal for filming from July until October. Another was apparently suggested by Eisenstein's good friend Vsevolod Vishnevsky. Eisenstein often visited Vishnevsky for a meal, after which they would retire to the writer's study and spend long periods sitting looking at each other in silence. After *Bezhin Meadow* was stopped, Vishnevsky did his best to encourage Eisenstein, and out of this there eventually emerged the idea for a joint project entitled *We the Russian People*. Eisenstein was enthusiastic about the script and, after its favourable reception by a group of actors, scenographers and the artistic council of Mosfilm to whom Vishnevsky read it, looked forward to starting work on the film. But it proved to be, as Vishnevsky wrote two years later, yet another of 'all those films which Eisenstein's enemies obstructed'.

Another possibility was Feuchtwanger's historical novel *The Ugly Duchess*, which Eisenstein discussed with the author during his visit to Moscow in connection with the screening of his novel *The Oppenheim Family*. In March 1937 Feuchtwanger also sent a copy of another novel, *The False Nero*, to Eisenstein, who made a series of sketches and designs for it, possibly for a stage production. Then there was talk of a film based on V. V. Distler's scenario about gold-prospectors in Siberia.

Projects, projects and yet more projects. . . . But the next film was to be an entirely different proposition.

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