

## Document Citation

Title	<b>Ivan the terrible, part II</b>
Author(s)	
Source	<i>Publisher name not available</i>
Date	
Type	article
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	3
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Boyarskii zagovor (Ivan the Terrible, part 2), Eisenstein, Sergei, 1958



**I**n *Ivan the Terrible, Part II* we have the last work of the greatest talent the cinema has yet known—Griffith was the instinctive genius, creating a whole art form *ex nihilo*, but Eisenstein was the more conscious, using Griffith's vocabulary with unequalled freedom and brilliance. It is the late decadence of this talent, comparing with *Potemkin* or *Ten Days* as mannerist painting compares to that of the high renaissance. But the dying lion is still a lion.

The biographical background is important. In the six years between 1924 and 1930, Eisenstein completed four films; three of them masterpieces. In the seventeen years between 1931 and his death in 1948, he completed three, of inferior quality: *Alexander Nevsky* and the two parts of *Ivan*. For in 1929 Stalin had achieved complete power, and Eisenstein, as the great avant-gardist in cinema, was the focus of attack by the philistine Stalinist art bureaucracy, whose tastes in movies were Hollywoodian. For six years he was unable to complete a single film. Then he seems to have given in and the result in 1938 was *Nevsky*, a slow-paced patriotic pageant without any of the revolutionary dynamism of his early films, and especially without montage, the crux of his film aesthetic, which was *streng verboten* in the era of Socialist Realism. Part I of *Ivan* was shown in 1945, but Part II was suppressed; its current release is part of the post-Stalin "thaw." I applaud the decision of Khrushchev's bureaucrats, but I think Stalin's were smarter. For *Ivan II* is ambiguous as propaganda and as art. It is damnably Formalistic. Blocked from montage, Eisenstein seeks formal beauty in sets and costumes, which are sumptuously fantastic, and in the acting, which is heavily stylized in the manner of grand opera. As Nikita Khrushchev might put it: the Devil creeps in the back door.

The film shows the disintegration of Eisenstein's personality under the frustrations and pressures he had endured for fifteen years. His homosexuality, for instance, now has free play. Of the eleven leading roles, only one is female—the witchlike Efrosinia. There are an extraordinary number of young, febrile and—there's no other word—pretty

males, whose medieval bobbed hair makes them look startlingly like girls. Ivan has a favorite, a flirtatious, bold-eyed young police agent, and many excuses are found for bringing their heads together and having Ivan put his hands on the handsome young face. But Eisenstein was ashamed of his homosexual tendencies and their liberation meant despair, not joy. Has any orgy been less pleasurable than the womanless banquet scene (shown in color) that is the climax of the film? There is nothing in the great wine cups; there is nothing to eat except some plastic black swans borne in on the heads of a line of (male) waiters; Ivan is soberly plotting the destruction of his cousin the whole time; there is a wild (all male) dance, true, but the dancers fling themselves about not in sensuous abandon but in desperate frenzy. Everything in the film emphasizes this mephitic, airless, joyless, neurotic atmosphere. The Caligari-like sets are claustrophobic—the doorways, for instance, are often so low that people have to stoop to go through them. There are almost no outdoor scenes; we are trapped in the oppressive gloom of Ivan's palace. The leading characters are men become beasts: Ivan is a lean, tired old wolf; the boyars are great fat bears billowing in furs; the two leaders of Ivan's Oprichina police are bulls with curls low on their brutal foreheads; the wicked Efrosinia is a cruel-beaked hawk, etc.

Taken on the surface, *Ivan II* is a parable justifying Stalin's policies. Ivan is the determined leader of the Russian people against their foreign and domestic enemies; his Oprichina is the GPU; the boyar nobles are the kulaks and other bourgeois elements, and they join with the church in working against Ivan-Stalin. Efrosinia, Ivan's aunt, who has poisoned his wife in *Ivan I* and whose plot to kill him and put her son, Vladimir, on the throne, is the theme of *Ivan II*—these treacherous kinsfolk are the Old Bolsheviks. Ivan-Stalin is reluctant to believe in Efrosinia's guilt—"Touch not the kinsmen of the Czar!" he orders the Oprichina-GPU—which is a bit of court flattery, since Stalin showed no such hesitation about condemning the Old Bolsheviks. Finally he acts when Efrosinia proclaims her jubilation over what she thinks is Ivan's

murdered body. (It is actually that of her son, whom Ivan, in a Stalinesque bit of double-crossing, has persuaded to wear his robes, so that Vladimir receives the dagger meant for him.) The film ends with Ivan on his throne proclaiming: "Now that we have put down internal treachery, our sword will be used only against foreign invaders."

But this surface reading is—superficial. Ivan is shown becoming a bloodthirsty beast, of course from the highest motives. "A monarch should follow the right if possible, but he should follow the evil path if necessary," says one of his advisers.

The crucial scene comes after Ivan has appealed for friendship to Philip, head of the Moscow church, saying pathetically, "I am alone." Philip—who is a noble, handsome person and alone of the leading characters looks like a man and not like a beast—agrees on condition he will be consulted before Ivan executes any more of his boyar friends and kinsmen. Ivan accepts this not unreasonable condition for friendship. But Malyuta, the chief of his Oprichina, has overheard the promise and there follows a curious scene in which Malyuta's great shaggy head is fondled by Ivan as he calls himself Ivan's hunting dog. "Trust nobody," he says. "You have power, use force!" He insists that Philip merely wants to gain time for his plots and he suggests that the thing to do is to execute Philip's kinsmen, the Volynetski. Ivan is persuaded at once and begins to outline a plan of action while Malyuta actually barks and whimpers like a dog. The next scene shows Malyuta beheading the three leading Volynetski. Ivan appears, views the bodies, and says, "That's not enough." Philip is then arrested and executed. It seems impossible that this rapid transition from vows of friendship to betrayal to butchery is not meant to suggest certain aspects of Stalin's statecraft.

There are two open homosexuals in the film, both villains. The minor one is the King of Poland, who is shown in his effete court camping around in a fantastically huge ruff—and, of course, plotting to lead a crusade of civilized Europe against barbarous Muscovy. The major one is the very odd character of Efrosinia's son, Vladimir, who is presented as drunken, coward-

DWIGHT

MacDONALD



ly and effeminate, but who is also the only person in the film with a sensible attitude towards the goings-on at Ivan's nightmare court. He keeps telling his mother—a woman who makes Disney's witches look positively benevolent—that he doesn't *want* to replace Ivan, that he can't *stand* bloodshed, and that his only desire is to live in peace. These humane sentiments are accompanied by pouts and girl-ish eye-play. It is very confusing. But I think Vladimir is the key. He gets drunk at the banquet—the only one who showed that much spontaneity at that dreary carousal—and when Ivan craftily uses his old gambit, “I am alone and friendless,” Vladimir is moved to say: “You have one friend—me.” He shows his sincerity—a drunken one, true, but in *Ivan II* any sincerity is welcome—by confiding that his mother is always after him to take away the throne from Ivan but that (pout) he doesn't *want* to. Ivan-Stalin at once begins to persuade Vladimir to dress up in his clothes, with the fatal results noted above.

Is it too much to speculate that Eisenstein identified himself with homosexual Vladimir, the helpless victim of palace intrigues who just wanted to live in peace (read: to make his films in peace) and thought all this political stuff was nonsense? James Agee used to argue with me that in *Nevsky* and *Ivan I* Eisenstein was covertly satirizing Stalinism; I didn't agree then, but now I think he might have been right. Note, for instance, that Vladimir keeps falling asleep at the most crucial moments. This obviously is meant to show his trivial nature. But considered a little more deeply, it may also be intended to present him as the only wise man in that milieu, where men become beasts in the snarling fight for power. In Ivan's court, only the sleeping can be happy—or innocent. ‡

“IVAN THE TERRIBLE, Part II” was the last work of Sergei Eisenstein, and although completed in 1945 it was withheld from exhibition in the Soviet Union until last year. The ban seems to have stemmed directly from the Central Committee of the Communist Party; Eisenstein was criticized for his portrait of Ivan as a brooding, suspicious, indecisive leader, and there were rumors that the movie was felt to reflect the personality of Stalin as well as the Czar. The negative was preserved, however, and was found, when released in Russia, to contain a short color sequence, the only work in that medium done by Eisenstein. Now that we have it on view here, the film appears to be more of a curiosity than anything else, filled with plots rather than plot, done in a style that is supposedly monumental, and containing much rolling of eyes by leading Soviet actors, including the famous Nikolai Cherkassov, who plays Ivan.

There is a prologue made up of shots from Part I that, quickly (and, I'm afraid, confusingly) covers Ivan's coronation, his struggles with the boyars, his campaigns against foreign enemies, and the poisoning of his wife by his aunt, Efrosinia. From that point on there is much brooding by Ivan, with the camera focusing on Cherkassov's eyes as he first turns them west, then east, and then vaguely southeast. Other actors appear and roll their eyes, among them Andrei Abrikosov, as Philip, Metropolitan of Moscow. Heads move towards each other, and assassinations take place, leading towards the plot to murder Ivan, who tricks a nephew into being murdered in his stead. The color sequence is the banquet scene, during which Ivan does some stupendously obvious stage managing.

Perhaps it all has more meaning for the Russians (it is *their* history, after all) but as film-making it is slow-paced to the point of discomfort, and whatever monumentalism was intended seems to have degenerated into the operatic, without benefit of music. “Ivan” was originally planned as a trilogy, but Eisenstein, a few years after completing Part II, died of a series of heart attacks, and it is unfortunate, and indicative perhaps of the troubles he ran into with party dogma and interference, that he could not have left behind something more fascinating as a final work. Subtitles provided for the version shown here do not provide much clarification nor do they make for interesting reading.

ly and effeminate, but who is also the only person in the film with a sensible attitude towards the goings-on at Ivan's nightmare court. He keeps telling his mother—a woman who makes Disney's witches look positively benevolent—that he doesn't *want* to replace Ivan, that he can't *stand* bloodshed, and that his only desire is to live in peace. These humane sentiments are accompanied by pouts and girl-ish eye-play. It is very confusing. But I think Vladimir is the key. He gets drunk at the banquet—the only one who showed that much spontaneity at that dreary carousal—and when Ivan craftily uses his old gambit, "I am alone and friendless," Vladimir is moved to say: "You have one friend—me." He shows his sincerity—a drunken one, true, but in *Ivan II* any sincerity is welcome—by confiding that his mother is always after him to take away the throne from Ivan but that (pout) he doesn't *want* to. Ivan-Stalin at once begins to persuade Vladimir to dress up in his clothes, with the fatal results noted above.

Is it too much to speculate that Eisenstein identified himself with homosexual Vladimir, the helpless victim of palace intrigues who just wanted to live in peace (read: to make his films in peace) and thought all this political stuff was nonsense? James Agee used to argue with me that in *Nersky* and *Ivan I* Eisenstein was covertly satirizing Stalinism; I didn't agree then, but now I think he might have been right. Note, for instance, that Vladimir keeps falling asleep at the most crucial moments. This obviously is meant to show his trivial nature. But considered a little more deeply, it may also be intended to present him as the only wise man in that milieu, where men become beasts in the snarling fight for power. In Ivan's court, only the sleeping can be happy—or innocent. ‡