

This Thing of Darkness: Eisenstein's Ivan the Terrible in Stalin's Russia by Joan Neuberger
[book review]

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Abstract:

In *This Thing of Darkness: Eisenstein's Ivan the Terrible in Stalin's Russia*, Joan Neuberger offers a detailed examination of Sergei Eisenstein's final film, *Ivan the Terrible* (parts 1, 2, and 3), and asserts that the film was a laboratory for the director's accumulated lifelong theories and practices in Soviet Russian cinema. She presents several related arguments to illustrate how Eisenstein enacted his theories to create a portrait of Ivan that resonated with myriad historical accounts of the former tsar and Eisenstein's personal experiences with mid-twentieth-century Soviet rule. Neuberger divides these arguments into six chapters, where she draws on the director's unpublished and published notebooks and collates them with known secondary literature in English and Russian, including Noam Kleiman's important work. Neuberger states that one of her goals is to familiarize readers with the significance of the film and make its complexity approachable for audiences.

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Article:

In *This Thing of Darkness: Eisenstein's Ivan the Terrible in Stalin's Russia*, Joan Neuberger offers a detailed examination of Sergei Eisenstein's final film, *Ivan the Terrible* (parts 1, 2, and 3), and asserts that the film was a laboratory for the director's accumulated lifelong theories and practices in Soviet Russian cinema. She presents several related arguments to illustrate how Eisenstein enacted his theories to create a portrait of Ivan that resonated with myriad historical accounts of the former tsar and Eisenstein's personal experiences with mid-twentieth-century Soviet rule. Neuberger divides these arguments into six chapters, where she draws on the director's unpublished and published notebooks and collates them with known secondary literature in English and Russian, including Noam Kleiman's important work. Neuberger states

that one of her goals is to familiarize readers with the significance of the film and make its complexity approachable for audiences.

Neuberger begins by providing essential information about the film and a review of mid-century cultural politics in chapter 1. Her detailed account of the film's production history reveals the complexity of scenario revision, the difficulties of wartime production, and Eisenstein's intent to counter formulaic norms of Soviet historical films. In order to maintain artistic autonomy, Eisenstein negotiated contemporaneous cultural politics by cultivating his position with Josef Stalin, and relying on the support of the film industry head, Ivan Bolshakov. Such efforts were exceptionally difficult; this was his "potholed path."

Chapter 2 contains a thorough discussion of how Eisenstein used historical and literary sources to develop Ivan's character and his relationships. Since Eisenstein was a voracious reader and perpetual student of the arts, analyzing the creative application of his readings to his film work is admirable. Neuberger asserts that *Ivan the Terrible* is a "theory of history" and demonstrates how Eisenstein created a "generalizable historical contour" that was immediately recognizable and mostly historically accurate, yet also individualistic and psychological. Eisenstein developed his theories of dialectics to inform and produce a dynamic representation of trauma, violence, revenge, suffering, and power encapsulated in Ivan that was intended to capture the viewer's empathy.

Neuberger continues her discussion of history and dialectics in chapter 3, where she argues that the film is simultaneously a self-portrait and a tragedy and analyzes the film's *mise-en-scène*. She continues to examine Eisenstein's writing to provide an overview of the films' storylines, a discussion of how the "unity of opposites" (Eisenstein's dialectics) accrue meaning from part 1 through part 3, and how that accrual builds Ivan into a violent, troubled, suffering, and lonely leader. From an analysis of the emotional power of inanimate objects to speculation on Eisenstein's psychological state and own biography, Neuberger asserts that Eisenstein made this film personal and responsive to histories and contemporaneous experience through the concept of the historical "spiral," that is, a comingling of the past and the present.

Two of the middle chapters explore Eisenstein's theories of the "fugue" (chap. 4) and "polyphonic montage" (chap. 5) in relation to other film elements, including music, acting, and cinematography. In Western concert music, primarily of the Baroque era, the fugue is a strict form and genre with specific rules. Often it is misunderstood as a style (i.e., fugal), which is not beholden to the rules assumed in the genre. Eisenstein theorized a unique conceptualization of the fugue; for him, it functioned metaphorically rather than literally, which Neuberger details. Eisenstein also approached "counterpoint" in the 1928 "Statement on Sound" similarly, and he and his cowriters were publicly criticized by musicologist Vladimir Messman for their misapplication of the musical concept. Although Neuberger's analysis is less focused on the shades of musical meaning, it illustrates nonetheless how Eisenstein borrowed musical concepts such as the fugue as organizational structures for his theories and practice, particularly for Ivan's characterization.

Neuberger continues her discussion of music and includes acting, gesture, and cinematography in chapter 5, analyzing how Eisenstein, as evidenced in his writings, employed the concept of the

musical idea of polyphony to create “polyphonic montage.” In a lengthy discussion on music, for example, she shows how Eisenstein understood music as a concept and a practice, how he directed the composer Sergei Prokofiev to execute that concept, and attempts to analyze the musical design as part of Eisenstein’s idea of polyphonic montage. Her passionate engagement with music as a Slavacist is notable, especially since more research is needed on Prokofiev and film in music studies. Her terminology and presentation of music histories and cultural contexts, however, reveal misunderstandings. Her identification of Ivan’s “six-note figure” as the “devil in music,” on which she bases a significant part of her discussion, betrays a misunderstanding of Royal Brown’s passing observation about Ivan’s illness scene. The “devil in music” is a phrase that was first used in European medieval musical practice to describe the interval of a tritone, which is the space between two pitches. Brown instead was mentioning the less noticeable tritone key relationship between F minor and B minor from the beginning to the end of the scene, which in this case is the space between two keys over a period of time. The “six-note figure” itself does not contain the "devil in music."

Neuberger’s final chapter offers a focused discussion of reception politics—with singular attention given to published and archival materials that reveal debates during screenings and within the artistic council—and Stalin’s speeches. Her discussion of these materials illuminates the relationship between Stalin and Eisenstein, why part 1 received a Stalin Prize and part 2 did not, and most interestingly, a speculation on the narrative of Stalin’s reception of part 2. Neuberger presents the possibility, based on speculative reading of available materials, that the homoerotic subtexts of part 2 were infuriating for Stalin and fueled his excessively negative response to the film. Her provocative reading adds a unique perspective to the ongoing narrative of Stalin’s reception of *Ivan the Terrible*.

Neuberger’s book on *Ivan the Terrible* is a welcome addition to Russian film studies. She collates readings of archival sources with novel interpretations of published ones to create a text that offers a thorough explication of the complexity, nuance, and depth of Eisenstein’s lifelong development of his montage theory and its final culmination in *Ivan the Terrible*. Neuberger achieves her goal of providing a text that inspires further interest in the film and makes it approachable.