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MY WORTHLESS AND VICIOUS FILM

By *Sergei Eisenstein*

The Soviet system makes frequent use of public self-criticism to keep ideological nonconformity at a minimum. Eisenstein's statement below is one of these humiliations by command. It was first published in the Soviet journal *Kultura i Zhizn* ("Culture and Life"). The famous film director (1898-1948) had been in disgrace once before, in the 1930's, after he had made two films unacceptable to the regime. He redeemed himself with *Alexander Nevsky* (1937) and *Ivan the Terrible*, Part I (1945), which won the Stalin Prize, First Class. Part II of the film, however, was publicly condemned by the Party's Central Committee in September, 1946, and was not released for showing till 1958. Even today not all seems to be well in the Soviet film industry. Wrote *Pravda* on March 24, 1963: "In order to improve the guidance over the development of cinematography the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet has established a State Cinematographic Committee. Its chairman A. V. Romanov is first assistant director of the Ideological Department of the Party's Central Committee."

As noted elsewhere the three Eisenstein films mentioned here can be rented from Brandon Films (offices in New York, Chicago, and San Francisco). The leading actor of the three films, Nikolai Cherkasov, has written *Notes of a Soviet Actor*. Marie Seton, *Eisenstein* (paperback) is the best biography. See Eisenstein's own writings, *Film Form and the Film Sense* (paperback). A history of Russian movie making is Jay Leyda, *Kino*. See also *The Soviet Film Industry* by Paul Babitsky and John Rimberg. The scenario of all three parts of Eisenstein's film (Part 3 was never released), together with stills from the first two parts, is available in Sergei Eisenstein, *Ivan the Terrible*. For a discussion of Soviet films since World War II see Joseph Anderson, "Soviet Films since 1945," *Films in Review*, February, 1953, and Dwight Macdonald, "Soviet Cinema: A History and an Elegy," *Problems of Communism*, November-December, 1954, and January-February, 1955. For an English monthly devoted to films and published in Moscow see *Soviet Film*.

It is difficult to imagine a sentry who gets so lost in contemplation of the stars that he forgets his post. It is difficult to imagine a tankist eagerly reading an adventure novel while going into battle. It is difficult to believe there could be a foundryman who, instead of giving all his attention to the mass of molten

metal flowing into prepared forms, turns aside from his work to contemplate a pattern of his own fantasy. They would be a bad sentry, a bad tankist and a bad foundryman. Each would be a bad soldier.

From *The New Leader* (New York), December 7, 1946.

In our Soviet Army and in our Socialist production there are no bad soldiers.

It is even more difficult to realize that during the stern accounting caused by demands of our Soviet reality such bad and unworthy soldiers were discovered in the front lines of literature and art.

Reading again and again the resolution of the Party Central Committee about the film *Great Life*, I always linger on the question which it put forth: "What can explain the numerous cases of production of false and mistaken films? Why did such known Soviet directors as Comrades Loukov, Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Kozentsev and Trauberg create failures while in the past they have created films of high art value?"

I cannot let the question go unanswered. First of all we failed because at a critical moment in our work we artists forgot for a time those great ideas our art is summoned to serve. Some of us forgot the incessant struggle against our Soviet ideals and ideology which goes on in the whole world. We lost for a time comprehension of the honorable, militant, educational task which lies on our art during the years of hard work to construct the Communist society in which all our people are involved.

The Central Committee justly pointed out to us that the Soviet artist cannot treat his duties in a light-minded and irresponsible way. Workers of the cinema should study deeply whatever they undertake. Our chief mistake is that we did not fulfill these demands in our creative work.

Like a bad sentry we gaped at the unessential and secondary things, forgetting the main things, and so abandoning our post. We forgot that the main thing in art is its ideological content and historical truth. Like a bad foundryman, we lightmindedly allowed

the precious stream of creation to be poured out over sand and become dispersed in private, unessential sidelines. This brought us to vices and mistakes in our creations.

A stern and timely warning of the Central Committee stopped us Soviet artists from further movement along this dangerous and fatal way which leads towards creative degradation.

The resolution of the Central Committee reminds us with new force that Soviet art has been given one of the most honorable places in the decisive struggle of ideology of our country against the seductive ideology of the bourgeois world. Everything we do must be subordinated to tasks of this struggle.

In the second part of *Ivan the Terrible* we committed a misrepresentation of historical facts which made the film worthless and vicious in an ideological sense.

We know Ivan the Terrible as a man with a strong will and firm character. Does that exclude from the characterization of this Tsar the possibility of the existence of certain doubts? It is difficult to think that a man who did such unheard-of and unprecedented things in his time never thought over the choice of means or never had doubts about how to act at one time or another. But could it be that these possible doubts overshadowed the historical role of historical Ivan as it was shown in the film? Could it be that the essence of this powerful 16th-century figure lies in these doubts and not in his uncompromising fight against them or unending success of his state activity? Is it not so that the center of our attention is and must be *Ivan the builder, Ivan the creator of a new, powerful, united Russian power, Ivan the inexorable destroyer of everything that resisted his progressive undertakings?*

The sense of historical truth betrayed me in the second part of Ivan the Terrible. The private, unimportant and non-characteristic shut out the principal. The play of doubts crept out to the front line and the wilful character of the Tsar and his historically progressive role slipped out of the field of attention. The result was that a false and mistaken impression was created about the image of Ivan. The resolution of the Central Committee accusing me of a wrong presentation which disfigures historical truth says that in the film Ivan is presented as "weak-charactered and lacking in will, a kind of Hamlet." This is solidly grounded and just.

Some historically wrong impressions of the epoch and reign of Ivan the Terrible which were reflected in my film were widely current in pre-Revolutionary literature. This was especially true of the film's presentation of the Tsar's bodyguards [*oprichniki*]. Works of the classics of Marxism on questions of history have illustrated and made available to us the historically correct and positive evaluation of Ivan's *progressive lifeguards*. In the light of these works it should not have been difficult to overcome the false presentation of the lifeguards in the writing of Traitor-Prince Andrei Kurbsky. It should have been easy to unveil tendentious descriptions of Ivan's activity which were left us by historian spies of the Western Powers, Taube and Kruse or the adventurer Henry Staden. But it was much more difficult to overcome in one's own self the remnants of former purely imaginary presentations left over from childhood reading of such books as Alexei Konstantinovich Tolstoy's novel *Silver Prince*, or the old novel *Koudeyar*. [This Tolstoy, related neither to playwright Alexei or novelist Leo, died in 1875.]

As a result, in the film the progressive *oprichniki* were presented as a gang of degenerates something like the Ku Klux Klan. The Central Committee justly condemned this rough misrepresentation of historical fact.

On the basis of the Central Committee's resolution, all workers in art should make a most important conclusion as to the necessity of putting an end to light-minded and irresponsible attitudes toward their work. We must fully subordinate our creations to the interest of education of the Soviet people, especially youth, and not step aside one jot from this aim.

We must master the Lenin-Stalin method of perception of real life and history to such a full and deep extent as to be able to overcome all remnants or survivals of former notions which, although they have been banished from our consciousness a long time, are obstinately and maliciously attempting to infiltrate into our works as soon as our creative vigilance is weakened even for only a single moment.

This is a guarantee that our cinematography will be able to eliminate all ideological and artistic failures and mistakes which lie like a heavy load on our art in this first postwar year. This is a guarantee that in the nearest future our cinematography will again create highly ideological artistic films worthy of the Stalin epoch.

All of us workers of art must interpret the hard and just criticism of our work contained in the decision of the Central Committee as an appeal to the widest and most ardent and purposeful activity, an appeal to us masters of art to fulfill our duty before the Soviet people, state and party by creation of highly ideological artistic films.