IVAN THE TERRIBLE
Иван Грозный

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Yuri Tsivian

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The British Film Institute
promotes greater understanding
and appreciation of, and
access to, film and moving image
culture in the UK.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
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For my grandmother Anna Grishina (1900–90)
who did not hesitate to take me to this film.

'IVAN THE TERRIBLE'

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Introduction: The Film and its Double

Ivan the Terrible is a complex movie – some people even think the most
complex movie ever made – not in the sense that its plot is tangled or
complicated, but because to embrace it we need to see beyond what the
characters say and do. To begin with, *Ivan* is visually complex; then, it
has Prokofiev's complex music; and the way Eisenstein structures its
story is closer to patterning than it is to narrative progression. It is this
triple complexity that this book seeks to address – not to exhaust it, but
rather to encourage the viewer to take over next time he or she decides to
see the film.

To set the scene, I will start with Eisenstein's political situation, but
this book is not really about *Ivan* and history or *Ivan* and politics. Not
that this is unimportant, but the quality of the work done in this area by
Naum Kleiman[1] and Leonid Kozlov[2] means there is little my book can
add to it. In addition, as I am writing this, another little book called *Ivan
the Terrible* is being written by the excellent historian of Russia Joan
Neuberger: the focus of that book is exactly on Eisenstein's vision
(indeed, version) of history. I do not want to make this sound like a tie-in
offer, but put together, Neuberger's book and mine cover twice the
ground.

Nor am I doing a close analysis of the type found in another
excellent book (*Ivan* is fortunate in having so many) written two decades
ago by another colleague of mine, the film scholar Kristin Thompson.[3] In
the best Formalist tradition, Thompson's enquiry is close to scientific.
She begins by isolating her object: *Ivan* as an ensemble of artistic devices,
and goes on from there to explain how these are intended to affect the
viewer. I have opted for a different angle. My book, too, looks at *Ivan*
through the prism of Eisenstein's intentions, but whereas Thompson
extracts those from the film's final form, my object is more dispersed: I
work chiefly from pre-production documents (notes, sketches,
drawings). In other words, what interests me is not so much the film *per
se*, but the film in the making, its evolution from scrawl to screen, as it
were.

This interest, however, is not descriptive or biographical – I am not
writing a biography of Eisenstein's film – my plan is to analyse it in
formation. Such an approach as I have attempted in this book can reveal
some aspects of *Ivan* which are normally hard to perceive, but it also has

its peculiarities. At one point I found myself in a quandary which I believe I managed to turn to an advantage. Not all artists' intentions are equally viable; in the final film, many of Eisenstein's initial ideas are either not found, or found transformed beyond recognition. I wound up with two films on my hands instead of one: one that exists plus its immaterial twin – the film that Eisenstein *wanted* to make. The question is: is this second, phantom movie relevant to our understanding of the first?

If it is, it is for three reasons. First, Eisenstein was not allowed to shoot Part Three, so keeping in view, for instance, how he intended *Ivan* to end is a legitimate attempt at a hypothetical reconstruction. Secondly, Eisenstein's work has always been experimental, and, as it sometimes happens with experimental art, to appreciate the result we need to have at least a vague idea of what could have been the tasks the artist set himself in this or that scene. Finally, I do not think that what we experience when watching a film is impervious to what we know about it. If it is true that our experiences – emotional or visual – depend on our mental set-up, the latter depends on our knowledge. We may admire the child who called the Emperor naked, but a candid eye is of no use to art: the more we know the better we can see. I was eight when I first saw *Ivan the Terrible* (a shattering experience, of which more later), and I am convinced that my present knowledge of how this or that element was intended to work has only sharpened my eye and made that long-established connection with the film more immediate and intense. This gives me hope that this book can serve not only as a historical explanation of Eisenstein's picture but also as a stimulant, an enhancement of viewing experience.

Which does not mean the viewer must read it first. On the contrary, this book reads best after the first viewing. This century made it easier than ever: in 2000 a well-compressed DVD version of *Ivan the Terrible* (complete with outtakes, screen tests and sundry scholarly supplements) became available from the Criterion Collection[4] (beware of other DVD versions!) – the next best thing to a good 35mm film print. With the story of *Ivan* fresh in the reader's mind it will be easier for me to get my point across.

On the other hand, brief priming should help those who wish or are impelled to begin with the book. The following summary is for readers taking the latter option; readers who have a good grasp of the film's story and are familiar with the landmarks of Eisenstein's career may wish to skip it and go straight to the section discussing Ivan, Stalin and Eisenstein.