

What is wrong with the beard : Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible* as an eccentric tragedy

Yuri Tsivian

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Article abstract

The article looks at some idiosyncrasies of Eisenstein's set design, make-up and lighting for *Ivan the Terrible* (1945) from three points of view : the first, through the eyes of its Kremlin censors; the second, through the lens of Eisenstein's working notes; the third, through the eyes of the American film director (and part-time film critic) Orson Welles. The author attempts to define what general audiences of the 1940s understood as "cinematic" and "pictorialist" and how Eisenstein's paradoxical film theory and theory of art allowed him to reverse this generally accepted division.

What is wrong with the beard: Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible* as an eccentric tragedy

Yuri Tsivian

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article traite de certaines particularités des décors, des maquillages et des éclairages d'*Ivan le terrible* (1945) d'Eisenstein, selon trois points de vue : celui des censeurs du Kremlin, celui que l'on peut déduire des notes de travail d'Eisenstein et celui du cinéaste américain Orson Welles (qui fut aussi, à ses heures, critique de cinéma). L'auteur tente ici de définir comment le public des années quarante pouvait percevoir la distinction généralement acceptée entre le « filmique » et le « pictural », et comment les théories paradoxales d'Eisenstein sur le cinéma et sur les arts lui ont permis de renverser pareille distinction.

ABSTRACT

The article looks at some idiosyncrasies of Eisenstein's set design, make-up and lighting for *Ivan the Terrible* (1945) from three points of view: the first, through the eyes of its Kremlin censors; the second, through the lens of Eisenstein's working notes; the third, through the eyes of the American film director (and part-time film critic) Orson Welles. The author attempts to define what general audiences of the 1940s understood as "cinematic" and "pictorialist" and how Eisenstein's paradoxical film theory and theory of art allowed him to reverse this generally accepted division.

This paper addresses that frequently asked question: How could it be that Part One of *Ivan the Terrible* received the Stalin

Prize, that Part Two was shelved and Part Three remained unfinished? Normally, we seek for a political answer. Here is a film about a celebrated nineteenth-century tyrant made in the 1940s — a high point of Stalin's own career in a similar capacity. Stalin, who loved to watch movies and loved to be pictured in them, must have felt like he was sitting for his portrait. Naum Kleiman and Leonid Kozlov have demonstrated that as the film progresses from Part One to Part Two, this portrait becomes increasingly unflattering — which was part of Eisenstein's 'mousetrap' design.¹ All I intend to show is that Stalin's political discontent was mixed with a disapproval of aesthetic nature.

There are three aspects of Eisenstein's idiosyncratic style — frescoes, shadows and make up — that I would like to discuss, particularly since some of these issues were raised at the meeting between Eisenstein and Cherkasov (on one side) and Stalin, Molotov and Andrei Zhdanov in the Kremlin on February 25, 1947. Zhdanov, then Secretary of the Central Committee, made the following remark, as taken down by Cherkasov: "Comrade Zhdanov said that Eisenstein's fascination with shadows distracted the viewer from the action, as did his fascination with Ivan's beard: Ivan lifted his head too often so that his beard could be seen." (Taylor 1988, p. 162) Some five months earlier (and three weeks after the Central Committee's resolution to condemn Part Two of *Ivan* appeared in the press), Eisenstein made a diary entry that sounds as if he were anticipating — and, in a sense, forestalling — Zhdanov's remark. That entry follows a detailed analysis of the scene in Ivan's stateroom (Part One) in which, as we recall, the huge shadow cast by Ivan's head forms the background of action (Eisenstein called this a 'shadowy commentary' to the scene). We find the following passage, the bulky first word of which (Eisenstein's own equivalent to the Russian term *peregruzhennost'*) not only communicates but almost depicts the principle of excess central to the aesthetics of Eisenstein's last film:

*Overburdendedness** with shadows — too many images stuffed; [but only] for *those* who do not "read," but simply hurry on after the action. That is, for those who

* In English in the original.

came to cinema for telegraphic syntax, rather than for poetic writing with repetitions, illustrations and music — for [those who came for] the anecdote alone.²

There are, I believe, two aspects to this mutual disagreement. On the one hand, as I have mentioned, Stalin behaved as a model, a fastidious sitter who wanted to see Ivan as a figure radiating the unquestioning authority of power rather than one torturing himself with the endless moral ‘to kill or not to kill.’ Indeed the *Pravda*’s resolution echoed this response, calling Eisenstein’s Ivan ‘a Hamlet of sorts.’ On the other hand, the Kremlin people were much like us — ordinary spectators that wanted *Ivan the Terrible* to be a good movie in a usual sense. And this was exactly what Eisenstein was not willing to deliver because during this period of his life he refused to see filmmaking as storytelling; he saw his job as part of the history of art.

Images on walls

This difference begins at the level of cognitive habits. “[M]erge the background *wholly* or *almost wholly* with the image. Make it absolutely compulsory for *sinister* scenes” (1942);³ “Painted background as an emotional commentary to dramatis personae — this principle must become key as to the staging” (1941)⁴. These notes, as well as two or three similar entries from Eisenstein’s working journal, document his pledge to treat elements of set design on a par with film characters. As films go, the idea was highly unusual — not only did it defy the intrinsic tendency of the eye to separate the figure from the foil, but it also went against a basic viewing habit: as film viewers, we are not used to inspect walls — we take them for granted.

Consider Archbishop Pimen — an example that allows us to trace, step by step, the way Eisenstein makes a film character unfold and merge (*wholly* or *almost wholly*) with the surrounding space. Stage one: early on, Eisenstein wants Pimen (a major force behind the conspiracy) to be associated with death: “Pimen is all white [...] His face is almost a cranium: yellow and white. Pearl embroidery.”⁵ Stage two: sketching the make-up scheme for Vsevolod Pudovkin (initially supposed to play Pimen), Eisenstein adds a skull-like quality to his head (fig 1). Throughout stages three and four, we find

him apply the same idea to the set design. Planning a scene in which Pimen demands that Philip bring the Tsar to his heels, Eisenstein sketched a room of dark vaults covered with white frescoes (fig. 2); pinned up onto the sketch are two photographic reproductions — printed in negative — of genuine frescoes from an old Russian church, one featuring the doomsday angel with bird-like wings (fig. 3), another — the apocalyptic horseman with a skull for a head (fig. 4), each to be enlarged to fill the vaults.

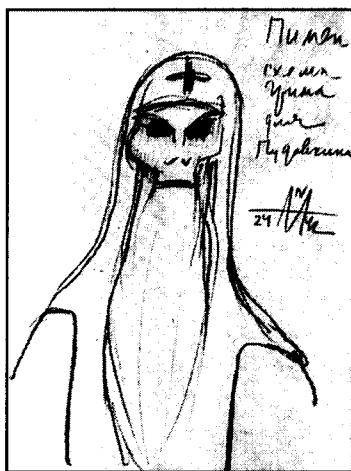


Fig. 1
Preparatory study for *Ivan the Terrible*

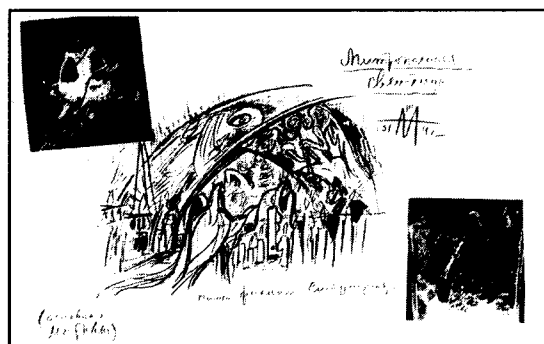


Fig. 2
Preparatory study for *Ivan the Terrible*



Fig. 3
Preparatory study for *Ivan the Terrible*



Fig. 4
Preparatory study for *Ivan the Terrible*

Finally, stage five, the phase of staging: Eisenstein maneuvers Aleksandr Mgebrov (who now plays Pimen) in such a way that the dead head of the apocalyptic horseman — an ‘emotional commentary’ — appears behind the Archbishop looking almost like his white shadow, or, as it were, his peripheral self (fig. 5).

We may note, following Kristin Thompson (1981, p. 181), a partial overlapping: Pimen’s crosier seems to form a scythe for the skeleton. As Eisenstein moves Pimen towards Philip, the two seem gradually to merge — this time, ‘wholly’ — with the other fresco, the doomsday angel, one of the wings of which, now appears to be growing from the character’s body (fig. 6).

In this respect, *Ivan the Terrible* is only relatively a movie: Eisenstein casts his viewer as a beholder looking (not watching!) at a painting by an old master, eye-primed for allegories, emblems

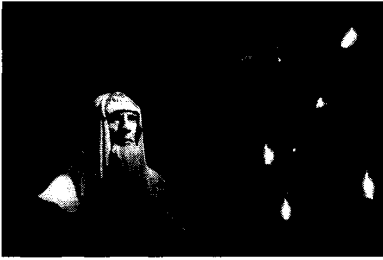


Fig. 5
Ivan the Terrible (Sergueï Eisenstein, 1945)

Fig. 6

and visual rhymes. However, I do not want to mislead the reader into taking this statement too literally. *Ivan the Terrible* is not an attempt to escape from cinema to painting, or to smuggle paintings into films. Regardless of his stake in art, Eisenstein saw his work on Ivan as quintessentially cinematic — as opposed to the work of some others, whose vaunted realism he dismissed as stock pictorialism. This is what his 1942 working diary says about Ivan Petrov's film, *Peter the First* (1937-1939) — a favorite of Stalin's, the type of bio-pic that Eisenstein knew he too was expected to turn out: "Acting in Petrov's film is a *succession of poses*. Equally, there is no montage but merely a succession of easel-painting shots. And the scenario is not an organism, but a checklist of traits."⁶

Beard

It may be that the primary aim of this note was not so much to critique *Peter the First* but rather to characterize the problem Eisenstein wanted his Ivan to evade: unlike Petrov's Peter, Eisenstein's hero was to embrace mutually exclusive rather than mutually complementary character traits. This is what he means by writing 'there is no montage.' Eisenstein conceived of *Ivan the Terrible* as a montage-image — what matters is not what we see at any given moment, but how what we are seeing now relates to what we have seen a moment ago, in other words, our response to contradictory clues.

To put this idea into practice, Eisenstein devised a number of strategies, some of which I would like to discuss below. Let me begin with a relatively simple case. Recall the joke about falling



Fig. 7
Ivan the Terrible (Sergueï Eisenstein, 1945)

Fig. 8

bells and empty heads that Ivan makes in the beginning of Part One as he confronts the rebellious mob that has broken into the palace. The joke, made as everyone apprehends a punishment, wins Ivan instant popularity (with the crowd as with the viewers). Yet, at once, Eisenstein makes Ivan cap this joke with another, a joke that foreshadows the atrocities to come with Part Two: ‘And can a head fall off... all by itself? In order to fall, it has to be cut...’

Consider the lighting of this scene. Figures 7 and 8, two sample frames from the same shot, with only a moment or two separating one from the other, show Ivan’s face before and after the word ‘cut’ (reinforced by the gesture): before, the face appears evenly lit (fig. 7), one could almost say flatly, were it not for the fact that this ‘flatness’ serves to offset a sudden shadow that hits the face as soon as the word is out (fig. 8). This abrupt shift does not happen alone. Those of my readers within the reach of a VCR will be rewarded to observe how this montage-image, visually as well as verbally, is reinforced by a musical accent.

I have called this case simple because such universally understood metaphors as light and shadow hardly need explanation. It was not Eisenstein’s way, however, to content himself with simple things, no matter how powerful. Figures 9 and 10 illustrate an apparently similar device — another sudden change in the lighting scheme aimed to create, within the space of one shot, a conflict-laden montage-image. It happens in Part Two: in the middle of the flashback, the storyline re-emerges for a moment in the present to show the Tsar relating the sad story of

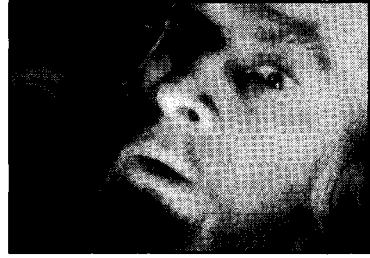
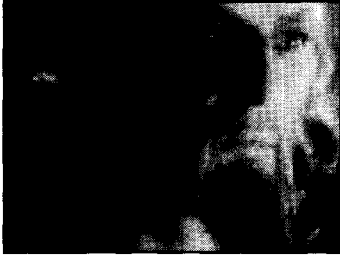


Fig. 9
Ivan the Terrible (Sergueï Eisenstein, 1945)

Fig. 10

his childhood. Here the contrast does not rely upon our primal response to light and shadow — one could even argue that, in a sense, Eisenstein works against it. Image A of this montage-image (fig. 9) is a grade darker than image B (fig. 10), but — I hope I am not overstocking my story with technical detail — the two images differ in softness, angle and the directionality of light. A — diffused penumbra: Ivan remembers his mother; B — hard-edged chiaroscuro: Ivan remembers who killed her. Calm backlighting in A; a distant spotlight adds a sentimental luster to Ivan's eyes; and the comely three-quarter angle is intended to give Ivan a Christ-like tinge. Next, a sudden swing of the head makes the facial angle disquieting and the stare maniacal, while the light, like a flash of lightning, strikes the face from below — a lighting scheme the likes of which we tend to associate with things Satanic.

The idea is clear — the character of Ivan cannot be taken in at a glance. Was this idea cinematic? For Eisenstein it was, but hardly for us — for whom the word spells compliance with the norm. Take the above examples. Seen separately, any of these lighting set-ups is but a stock-item of photographic vocabulary. Yet the way Eisenstein shifted them around — with the dauntless disregard for realistic motivation he had admired on the Kabuki stage — tips his idiom towards the fringe of the commonly accepted.

Recall Ivan's make-up. In *Non-Indifferent Nature* Eisenstein describes the formidable task he had given the make-up artist Vasiliï Goriunov: to make of Cherkasov's face a kaleidoscope of

fleeting resemblances without ever letting the viewer pin down any of them — from the biblical villain Nebuchadnezzar to the righteous Jew, Uriel Acosta (of the eponymous tragedy by Karl Gutzkov), from (Leonardo's?) Judas and the conventional stage-Mephistopheles to the Jesus Christ of Christian iconography (Eisenstein, 1964-1971, Vol. 3, p. 320). Indeed, one recognizes some conventional traits of Mephisto — broken eyebrows and the V-shaped piece ('widow's peak'⁷) wedging into the middle of the forehead, — particularly if a picture of Ivan is placed next to the 'Devil' diagram which, for the sake of comparison, I borrowed from the old make-up manual by Serge Strenkovsky⁸ (fig. 11).

Looking at these pictures, it is not easy to imagine how Eisenstein could have possibly hoped to make this face correspond with the image of Christ. Let me examine one case in which such resemblance is conjured up through allusions to art. It happens in Part One, when we find Ivan either mortally ill or pretending to be so — in any case, he miraculously resurrects himself to reward the true friends and to make note of the apostates. Consider a self-addressed memo complete with two sketches which Eisenstein jotted down to show the position of Cherkasov's head in a scene showing Ivan unconscious (fig. 12). The Russian text reads: 'Ivan's illness. To attain the "Holbein effect," put the



Fig. 11
Make-up scheme for Mephistopheles
from Strakovsky's manual

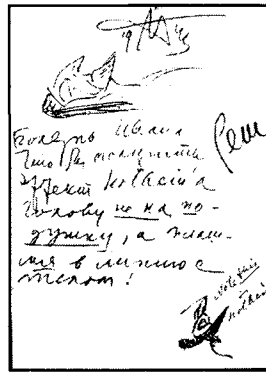


Fig. 12
Preparatory study for
Ivan the Terrible

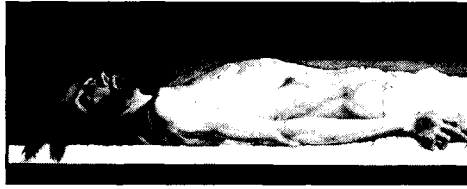


Fig. 13
Hans Holbein, *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (detail)



Fig. 14
Ivan the Terrible (Sergueï Eisenstein, 1945)

head not on a pillow, but flatways, aligned with the body. The reference (repeated, in English, above the sketch at the bottom — ‘Note *this* in Holbein’) is to “The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb,” the sixteenth-century painting by Hans Holbein.

To trace the way Eisenstein works Holbein’s picture into the film, compare Christ’s detail (fig. 13) with the sketch and the resulting movie. In the sketch (fig. 12), the head appears in two foreshortenings — one replicates Holbein’s, the other, in profile, is Eisenstein’s own version. These are not, as it may appear, two studies for one shot; in the movie, we see both the profile (fig. 14) and the ‘Holbein’ three-quarter angle (fig. 15), though in each case the camera angle is reversed. Eisenstein, as it were, ‘cuts into’ Holbein’s picture, dividing his image in two.

Nor is this all. Between the ‘Holbein’ close-up and its profile variation Eisenstein spliced a shot that taps another source of Christian iconography. The manner in which Anastasia touches Ivan’s foot (fig. 16) evokes Magdalene lamenting Christ as she is



Fig. 15
Ivan the Terrible (Sergueï Eisenstein, 1945)



Fig. 16

usually shown on Pieta compositions — for example, this Magdalene in a *Pietà* by Sandro Botticelli recalls Anastasia not only in attitude but even in the way her arm locks in a continuous curve with the foot and leg of Christ (fig. 17).

This example explains why Eisenstein considered his approach quintessentially cinematic — despite the fact that *Ivan* draws upon the art of painting more than it draws from life. Eisenstein used to call his aesthetics ‘operational’ (Eisenstein, 1997/2, p. 60) — and, indeed, the way *Ivan* taps the artistic tradition looks more like a cinematic operation than a pictorialist sponging of the sort he found at work in Petrov’s *Peter*. Eisenstein evokes Holbein not because he wants *Ivan* to *look* like pictures, but to make Holbein *work* for *Ivan*, and work the way only films are meant to work — by controlling the viewer’s associations. For it was Eisenstein’s old theory, still alive from the times when he, as virtually every Soviet filmmaker of the early twenties, was carried away with Pavlov’s teaching about the working of human and animal brain: that by showing this or that thing, e.g., a calf being slaughtered in *Strike*, the film director can arouse in the viewer this or that ‘unconditioned reflex’ and take out the ensuing anger onto something else, e.g., on the police shown raiding the strikers’ quarters. In principle, *Ivan* works the same way, the only difference being that in his early films Eisenstein preferred to work with physiological stimuli, whereas in *Ivan* he counts on our responses to culture.

Shadows

I hope it will not sound too philosophical if I say that, in



Fig. 17
Sandro Boticelli, *Pietà*
(detail)



Fig. 18
Ivan the Terrible
(Sergueï Eisenstein, 1945)

defiance of the mental habit that makes us think of the soul as something residing ‘inside’ the body, the ‘inner’ — that is, essential — character in Ivan is seldom confined to the shell of its physical self. In some cases, as we have just seen, the actor’s physical body may house a host of characters; in some others, there is not enough room for one — the character becomes a compound equation that involves both the figure and the space around: a fresco, a shadow.

Earlier on, I referred to the meeting between Eisenstein and Stalin, during which the Kremlin ideologist, Andrei Zhdanov, made the remarks about Ivan’s beard sticking up in an unnatural manner and about Eisenstein’s obtrusive shadows allegedly distracting the viewer from the action. Incidentally, this beard also caught the eye of a much worthier critic, the American director, Orson Welles (one of Eisenstein’s favorites), who was both impressed and taken aback by what he called “Eisenstein’s uninhibited preoccupation with pictorial effect.” Let me quote a witicism from Welles’ 1945 review of *Ivan* which will be better appreciated by those who recall the two symbols interlocked in the Soviet State Emblem:

What’s wrong with [the film], when it’s wrong, is what goes sour in the work of any artist whose bent is for eloquence. The Tsar’s beard, for instance, cutting like a mighty sickle through the hammer blows of the drama, isn’t nearly as entertaining to the audience as it was to the director.⁹

And I am almost sure I know the shot that fuelled this hammer-and-sickle joke — it must be the scene in which Eisenstein makes Cherkasov toss back his head so that his beard intersects with the candle behind it to suggest the shape of the cross (fig. 18).

We do not know what Eisenstein's response to the beard problem might have been had he had a chance to talk back; though, in one case, we know at least where the beard comes from — Hans Holbein's Dead Christ. We are somewhat more fortunate with respect to the shadows and what Eisenstein wanted them to mean. Recall his diary entry as of October 20, 1946, in which Eisenstein claims that if Ivan looks 'overburdened' with shadows, then it is only to those whose interest in films starts and ends with the story. This entry does not stop here — Eisenstein also explains how he intended for some of these shadows to work. To do so, he diagrammed by hand three shots from the scene that takes place in the stateroom (that is, Tsar's study in which Ivan is shown instructing his envoy to Britain). He even supplied these with captions which tell that the enormous profile cast onto the wall behind (fig. 19) suggests the dimension of statesmanship or, literally, Ivan's 'stately mind' (*gosudarstvennyi um*),¹⁰ whereas the shadow of the astrolabe above Ivan's head (fig. 20) reflects 'a maze of his cosmic world thoughts'¹¹ (this in English). We also learn that the 'shadow theatre' displayed on the wall behind Ivan as he gives instructions to the envoi (fig. 21) is governed by the same logic that makes pharaohs appear large and slaves small in Egyptian sepulchral



Fig. 19
Ivan the Terrible (Sergueï Eisenstein, 1945)



Fig. 20

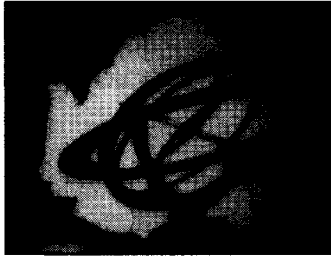


Fig. 21
Ivan the Terrible (Sergueï Eisenstein, 1945)

art: “[T]he disproportion of two shadows reflects the genuine difference of scales between two characters which normally would appear identically dimensioned.”¹²

In other words, Ivan’s ‘outer ego’ projected — literally — onto the wall behind him works to conjure up his truer — non-material, non-physical — self, much as the skull we see looming behind Pimen’s back (fig. 5) served to append Apocalyptic associations to the character of the Archbishop. There exists one sense, though, in which the operation with shadows differs from the method of associations-through-culture to which I referred in the previous section. Shadows not only emancipate the film director from the drab, inert, stolid ‘dimension’ of physical reality, letting him scale up the significant at will (the freedom that Eisenstein equally admired in children’s art and the art of the ancients); they also allow him to depict the ineffable — as a kind of imagery, for shadows also belong to the world of ‘primitive thinking’ which *Ivan the Terrible* (or, according to Eisenstein, any artwork) evokes. Another diary entry (made on the same day) goes on to link the peculiar two-tiered structure of the stateroom sequence to the assumed shadow cult of the past:

The dual reading of the figure and its shadow [in *Ivan* must be seen] als *Auswuchs* [as an outgrowth] of the primal mental concept positing the *autonomy of each*. Here, as there, we face the ‘autonomy’ of meanings pertaining, in this sense, to different ‘worlds,’ or dimensions — an *Auswuchs* based on the mythological stage [of mentality], and therefore drawing upon its [emotional] *appeal!*¹³ [Last word in English].

As he writes this, Eisenstein suddenly discovers an unlikely (hence all the more exciting) comedic parallel that (if one may say so about parallels) meets *Ivan* in the plane of this mythological past:

In one American musical (possibly, with Shirley Temple¹⁴) a black dancer is shown dancing against the background of a giant shadow. Next thing we see is that the shadow ceases to repeat his movements and starts dancing the dance of its own (a shadow dancing in a counterpoint duo with its own source!).¹⁵

This detour is less fortuitous than it seems. In his writings, Eisenstein often bemoans the fact that the film genre he was working in deprived him of the freedom enjoyed by eccentrics and animators who, much like children and the ancients, had the license to pay no heed whatsoever to reality. In his perceptive review of *Ivan*, Orson Welles spotted this comedic element that underlies Eisenstein's conception of visual style: "Critics and audiences in the English-speaking world, accustomed as they are to the pallid stylelessness of the 'realistic' school, are likely to be impatient, even moved to giggles by antics of Ivan and his friends."¹⁶ This is not confined to the English-speaking world alone, as far we can judge from Zhdanov's criticism. And the risk Eisenstein took was his conscious choice. If I were asked to define the genre of *Ivan the Terrible* — a film so determined to dodge all generic conventions — I would suggest that it should carry the name of 'eccentric tragedy.'

NOTES

1. Naum Kleiman, 'Formula finala' [The formula of the ending], in *Kinovedcheskije Zapiski* [Film Scholarship Annals], 1998, # 38, pp. 100-132; Leonid Kozlov, 'The Artist and the Shadow of Ivan,' in Richard Taylor and Derek Spring (eds.), *Stalinism and Soviet Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 109-130.

2. RGALI, *fond* 1923, *op.* 2, *edinitisa hranenija* 1176, list 53. Herewith, all references to Eisenstein's collection of papers catalogued under the number 1923 in this archive will appear in short, e.g. the above as RGALI 2/1176/53 (the last number is omitted whenever the item consists of a single sheet). All (double-)underlined segments in quotations from Eisenstein's writings are his own.

3. RGALI 1/565/18.

4. RGALI 2/1166/29.

5. RGALI 1/585; quoted after: Mira Meilakh, *Izobrazitel'naya stilistika pozdnykh filmov Eisensteina* [Visual style in Eisenstein's late films] (Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1971), p. 103.
6. RGALI 2/1165/30.
7. I am indebted to Valentina Freimane for this term.
8. Serge Strenkovsky, *The art of make-up*, edited by Elizabeth S. Taber (New York: Dutton, 1937), plate 13.
9. I am indebted to Sid Gottlieb for sending me this Orson Welles' May 23, 1945, column that appeared in the *New York Post*. James Naremore discusses Welles' view of Eisenstein's film in the chapter "The Radicalization of Style," *The Magic World of Orson Welles* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).
10. RGALI 2/1176/53.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*
13. RGALI 2/1176/54.
14. *Ibid.* A scene similar to the one described by Eisenstein exists in one of Fred Astaire's musicals of the 1930s.
15. RGALI 2/1176/54.
16. Welles, *op. cit.*

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- Kristin Thompson. *Eisenstein's Ivan the Terrible: A Neoformalist Analysis*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981.
- Richard Taylor (ed.). *The Eisenstein Reader*. London: BFI Publishing, 1998.