

Eisenstein at the Movies, Spring 1945

Author: Maya Garcia

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Abstract

The pioneering Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein kept a day planner in March-June 1945 listing titles of recent Hollywood films that at least partially correspond with screenings that he attended. Some of these titles re-appear in theoretical and personal writings from the final years of his life, 1946-48. This paper examines the historical circumstances of wartime American film screenings in Moscow and investigates a key subset of the films from Eisenstein's planner for insight into the mature director's ever-developing thoughts on contemporary cinema and American popular culture.

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And now, when our colleagues in art are becoming also our friends and comrades in battle, it is especially heartening to send them greetings from Moscow and understand that the friendship between the American and Soviet cinemas is in its way a symbol of the friendship between two great peoples in their great battle.

– Sergei Eisenstein, from an address to a Soviet conference on American and British film, August 1942¹

The multilingual and internationalist orientation that informs the work of Sergei Eisenstein make the pioneering Soviet film director an ever-appealing figure of study for “foreign” students of Russian and Soviet culture. Identification with this trans-national perspective was a key source of motivation for me, an American with an entirely elective affinity for the region, during the final years of my PhD in 2019-2023. I began conducting research in Eisenstein’s archive at the Russian State Archive for Literature and Art (RGALI) in the fall of 2019 for a dissertation on depictions of Ivan the Terrible and his rumored lover Feodor Basmanov in works of fiction. Knowing that my time in Russia was limited and precarious, I made an effort to copy as much material as I could from this archive to take with me into the uncertain future. By the time my last academic research visa to Russia expired in July 2022, I had amassed a store of documents far exceeding the scope of my dissertation (though only representing a small fraction of Eisenstein’s massive paper legacy). Thus, I was to continue a modified form of archival research from within the borders of my home country, to which I returned with great sorrow in February 2022.

¹ Sergei Eizenshtein, “Amerikanskaia kinomatografiia i ee bor’ba s fashizmom [American cinema and its fight with Fascism],” reprinted in L. A. Parfenov, ed., *Zhivye golosa kino. Govoriat vydaiushchiesia mastera otechestvennogo kinoiskusstva (30-e – 40-e gody). Iz neopublikovannogo [Living voices of film. Leading masters of domestic film art speak (’30s-’40s). From the unpublished]* (Moscow: Belyi bereg, 1999), 181-189: 189. All translations from Russian are my own, except where noted otherwise.

This article reflects an early phase in a new scholarly project suggested by a particularly mysterious item in my selection of Eisenstein's unpublished papers: a day planner for the year 1945 inscribed with a number of English-language film titles across the months of March-June. My research into the historical context of this intriguing document has become the basis for ongoing study of American films screened in the USSR during World War II. Academic literature, including both published primary documents and secondary scholarship, has examined in some detail Soviet screenings of Hollywood films in 1940-41 and 1946-49, focusing on the phenomenon of so-called "trophy films" acquired from seized collections in Soviet-occupied territories and exhibited domestically after significant editing and the addition of subtitles or dialogue dubbing.² My investigation centers on a thin spot in the literature concerning films that made their way to the USSR between 1942-1945 through diplomatic and commercial exchanges between the Allied nations. Most of the films listed in Eisenstein's day planner were recent releases of the mid-1940s that could not have been acquired as "trophies": the first round of trophies were taken in the territorial annexations of 1939-1940 and the second round in 1945 took from German archives, whose Hollywood holdings were limited to the prewar era.³

Currently, there exists only a small body of literature on the history of official wartime Soviet-American film exchanges.⁴ Very little of this existing

² Soviet and Russian filmmaker and scholar Maya Turovskaya began publishing on the topic in the 1980s; for her most extensive treatment, see: Maiia Turovskaiia, "Gollivud v Moskve, ili sovetskoe i amerikanskoe kino 30-x – 40-x godov [Hollywood in Moscow, or Soviet and American film of the '30s-'40s]," *Kinovedcheskie zapiski*, No. 97 (2010): 51-63. and "Operatsiia 'Trofeinyi fil'm' [Operation 'Trophy film']" in *Zuby drakon: moi 30-e gody [Teeth of the dragon: my 1930s]* (Moscow: ACT, 2015), 199-216. Contemporary scholars performing significant work on Soviet trophy films include Kristina Tanis and Claire Knight. See: Kristina Tanis, "'This Film Was Captured as a Trophy...': the International Context of Trophy Films," *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema* 14, No. 1 (2020): 2-16 and Claire Knight, "Enemy Films on Soviet Screens: Trophy Films during the Early Cold War, 1947-52," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 18, No. 1 (2017): 125-149.

³ For an overview of the trophy film corpus, see: Claire Knight, "Stalin's Trophy Films, 1946-56: A Resource (revised and updated)," *KinoKultura* 56 (2017), http://www.kinokultura.com/2017/56-knight_updated.shtml.

⁴ The most extensive treatment of the topic is a monograph by US foreign relations scholar M. Todd Bennett, *One World, Big Screen: Hollywood, the Allies, and World War II* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012). Bennett's discussion of the US government's side of the exchange is fairly detailed and well-researched, but his chapter on the Soviet side is marked by gaps and inaccuracies, likely a by-product of over-reliance on English-language sources and a lack of interest in Soviet film or its history. The most glaring inaccuracy is Bennett's claim that American films were "banned" in the USSR in the 1930s and entirely absent from Soviet screens until 1943. The drop-off in official film imports from the US is not in itself enough to posit the existence of a formal "ban" (a knee-jerk reaction common among American scholars of the USSR not attuned to the many subtler ways in which the government influenced culture). And more to the point, small numbers of American continued to make their way to Soviet screens throughout the 1930s and 1940s, a fact that can be found in Turovskaya's eyewitness accounts (see Maya

scholarship examines these exchanges from a Soviet/Russian studies perspective and even less from a transnational film studies perspective; these are precisely the perspectives I wish to bring to the topic. Tying my investigations to Eisenstein foregrounds both the Soviet/Russian and transnational cinematic contexts: he was both a leading Soviet film director of the era and a key player in Soviet-American cinematic relations.⁵ And while little has been written about his participation in the film exchanges of 1942-45, his own writings contain a number of clues on the subject. I am well-versed in the body of his writing that has been published, largely through the posthumous efforts of scholar-archivists who have been ceaselessly compiling his unpublished and often unfinished manuscripts from his death in 1948 to the present day. Additionally, I have studied a sizeable corpus of archival materials that have not yet been published, mostly those pertaining to his unfinished film project *Ivan the Terrible* (1941-1948), but also letters, essays, and diaries of various periods. I have been aided in my study of Eisenstein by the historical, biographical, and analytical research of several generations of scholars including Naum Kleiman, Yuri Tsivian, Joan Neuberger, and – most of all – my dissertation advisor Daria Khitrova.

The current paper brings my preliminary historical research, extensive readings of Eisenstein, and general cultural studies training to bear on the 1945 list of movie titles found in Eisenstein's archive. Through various means available to the resourceful modern researcher, I was able to view all but one of the named films. My readings of these films through the lens of Eisenstein's writings forms the core of this initial stage of my project. I hope to expand the project in the future to include more archival work on both the historical circumstances of the film screenings and Eisenstein's observations. For the former, I will need to consult the archives of several American and Russian (former Soviet) diplomatic bodies as well as film studios; for the latter I will need to access more of Eisenstein's unpublished archives, including transcriptions of his lectures at the All-Union

Turovskaya, "The 1930s and 1940s: Cinema in Context," in Richard Taylor and Derek Spring, eds., *Stalinism and Soviet Cinema* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 1993), 34-53.) as well as recent scholarship (see, for example, Kristina Tanis, "Vospriatie amerikanskikh fil'mov v SSSR: na primere odnogo pis'ma k Dine Durbin [Reception of American films in the USSR: by the example of one letter to Deanna Durbin]," *Cahiers du Monde Russe* 64, No. 3-4 (2023): 645-672.) based on published Russian-language primary sources, such as the lists of currently-playing films and where to see them included in Soviet newspapers such as *Vecherniaia Moskva* [Evening Moscow].

⁵ Regarding Eisenstein's promotion of American films in the USSR there are many examples to cite, such as his participation in the conference on British and American film (see footnote 1), his chairing of a commission that arranged educational screenings of foreign films (see footnote 17), and his extensive writings on Anglo-American filmmakers such as D. W. Griffiths, Charlie Chaplin, and Walt Disney. His significance in the U.S. is attested, among other things, by the inclusion of *Ivan The Terrible* in the film program of the United Nations Conference on International Organization held in San Francisco in April-June 1945. Eisenstein was invited to attend this conference, as well as several special screenings of *Ivan the Terrible* in Hollywood later that year. He was not able to leave the USSR to attend any of these events, but the invitations and programs are preserved in his archive (S. M. Eisenstein archival fond, RGALI 1923.1.666).

State Institute of Cinematography (VGIK) and more of his diaries and letters from the 1940s. Due to bilateral visa restrictions and financial sanctions, it is impossible to directly access Russians archive as a US citizen without a Russian bank account. Indirect access is possible in theory, but difficult to manage in practice as an independent scholar without institutional backing or funding. The lack of such support is my main barrier to accessing US archives at the moment, though I anticipate that the chaotic restructuring of the federal government currently underway may present challenges to using those archives associated with the State Department. I am optimistic that I will find the means to access some archives of interest in the next several years, through some combination of funding and academic networking. Ideally, I would like to forge a collaborative approach to reconstructing this moment of shared American-Soviet cultural history. My contribution to this greater scholarly project will begin with this close examination of one archival document and the films named therein.

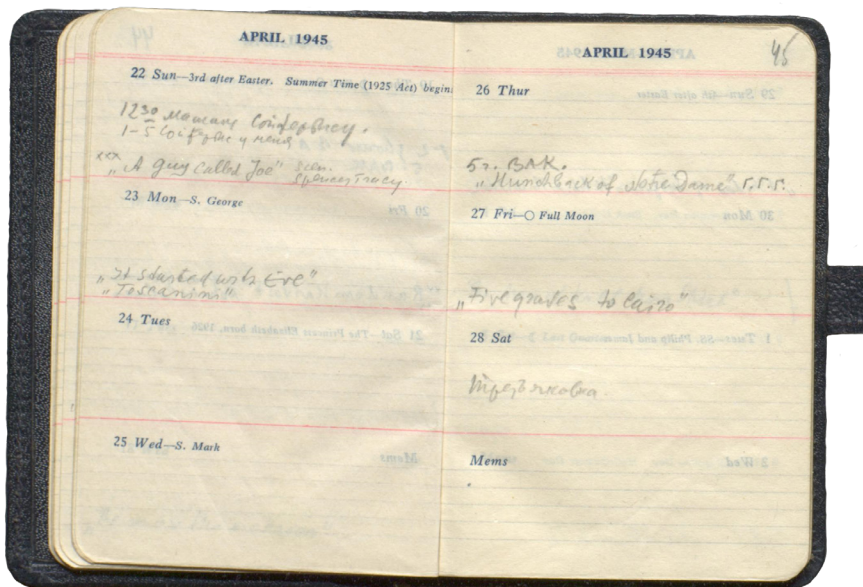


Fig. 1: Eisenstein's 1945 day planner.

Sergei Eisenstein kept many diaries throughout his life, most of them composed of paper scraps collected in folders. One of the few purpose-made bound diaries in his archive is a small, English-language day planner for the year 1945.⁶ The planner is mostly empty, but between the months of March and June there are a number of entries noting various engagements and events. The majority of these entries consist of titles that can be identified with recent Hollywood films (Eisenstein's transcriptions are often slightly off from the originals). These titles,

⁶ 1945 day planner inscribed by Sergei Eisenstein (S. M. Eisenstein archival fond, RGALI 1923.2.1150.40-51).

with one exception, do not overlap with the titles of films exhibited publicly in Soviet cinemas in 1945⁷, but as a leading film director, Eisenstein was among a privileged few who had additional means of watching movies, including closed screenings for industry professionals as well as private screenings put on by the US Embassy for the cultural and political elite of Moscow.

In 1944-1945, regular screenings of recent Hollywood films were arranged and hosted by Embassy staff led by acting director of the US Office of War Information (OWI) in Moscow, John F. Melby, with assistance from Kathleen Harriman, ambassador Averell Harriman's daughter and a journalist in the employ of OWI.⁸ Film screenings had been a feature of life at the ambassador's official residence, the (in)famous Spaso House in central Moscow, since the time of the first US ambassador to the USSR William C. Bullitt. However, deteriorating political relations between the two nations in the decade leading up to World War II led to increasingly limited contact between diplomats and civilians and a steep decline in the exchange of films. When the US and USSR became wartime allies at the end of 1941, political and cultural policies suddenly reversed course. Diplomats and filmmakers in both countries were swiftly engaged in a number of overlapping initiatives aiming for cooperation.

The current US ambassador in Moscow at the start of the war, William H. Standley, took a strong interest in importing and distributing contemporary American films as a means of educating the Soviet public on their new ally's culture and achievements, shown in their most glorified Hollywood light. Standley recalls rather bitterly in his memoir *Admiral Ambassador to Russia* the logistical and political roadblocks which held up his plans.⁹ The Soviet film director Mikhail Kalatozov recalls with equal bitterness the difficulties he faced on his trip to the US in 1943-1944 as an emissary of the Soviet film industry whose

⁷ I compiled the titles of American films shown in Soviet theaters in 1945 by consulting the listings printed in issues of *Vecherniaia Moskva* from across that year. The film in Eisenstein's planner that also appeared in 1945 cinema listings, *Bambi* (dir. David Hand, Walt Disney Productions, 1942), arrived in cinemas two months after the date given in the planner.

⁸ Little has been written about the Embassy screenings beyond the brief mentions in the biographies, memoirs, and letters of the US diplomats involved. See: Robert P. Newman, *The Cold War Romance of Lillian Hellman and John Melby* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 29-30; W. Averell Harriman and Elie Abel, *Special Envoy to Churchill and Stalin, 1941-1946* (New York: Random House, 1975), 299; and Rudy Abramson, *Spanning the Century: The Life of W. Averell Harriman, 1891-1986* (New York: W. Morrow, 1992), 354-5; Geoffrey Roberts, "'Do the crows still roost in the Spasopeskovskaya trees?' The Wartime Correspondence of Kathleen Harriman," *Harriman Magazine*, No. 2 (2015): 12-23. I am extremely grateful to Geoffrey Roberts, who is preparing Kathleen Harriman's correspondence for publication, for providing consultation on the topic of the film screenings in Kathleen's letters and sharing relevant excerpts from them with me. Even with all these sources, I have not yet been able to compile a full list of all films screened (let alone the particulars of dates and guestlists), but I am continuing my research towards a longer and more comprehensive project on the subject.

⁹ William H. Standley and Arthur A. Ageton, *Admiral Ambassador to Russia* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1955), 424-426.

many tasks included selecting and procuring films to import.¹⁰ This effort was one of the few in which Kalatozov eventually found success and two shipments of recent Hollywood films, one Kalatozov's and the other Standley's, began their long and difficult journey to the USSR in the summer of 1943.¹¹ By the time the films arrived, Standley had already been succeeded as ambassador by Harriman. Under Harriman, these films, as well as others (including older movies found in the attic of Spaso House), were screened at regular gatherings of diplomats and top Soviet military and government functionaries.¹² Beginning in early 1944, the guest list for certain regular gatherings widened to include highly-regarded cultural workers.¹³

Eisenstein, as a decorated filmmaker and senior member of the Artistic Council of the Committee on Cinema, certainly had the standing to be included on the Embassy movie night guest list. Additionally, his unfinished memoirs contain a cryptic fragment that has been convincingly decoded by leading Eisenstein scholar Naum Kleiman as a reference to an Embassy gathering at which the director was deeply taken with the charismatic Kathleen.¹⁴ As Eisenstein spent 1944 working overtime to complete the first film of his unfinished three-part epic *Ivan the Terrible*, it seems likely that he would have begun attending the Embassy screenings after the successful premiere of that film in January 1945, which is consistent with the use of the day planner beginning in March.¹⁵ I have not found

¹⁰ See Mikhail Kalatozov, "'Seks...vydokhsia i vkonets sostarilsia'. Mikhail Kalatozov: pis'ma iz Ameriki ['Sex...has played out and finally gotten old', Mikhail Kalatozov: letters from America]," S.V. Kapterev, ed. *Kinovedcheskie zapiski*, 65 (2003): 196-216; and Mikhail Kalatozov, *Litso Gollivuda* (Moscow, Goskinoizdat, 1949).

¹¹ Standley, Admiral Ambassador to Russia, 425; Kalatozov "'Seks...vydokhsia i vkonets sostarilsia'...", 213-14. These were not the only shipments of films from Hollywood to Moscow made during the war years, but they are the most well-documented.

¹² Rudy Abramson, *Spanning the Century: The Life of W. Averell Harriman, 1891-1986* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1992), 354-355.

¹³ Harriman, *Special Envoy to Churchill and Stalin*, 299.

¹⁴ Sergei Eizenshtein, "Printsessia dollarov," "Katerinki," in Naum Kleiman, ed., *Yo. Memuary [Yo. Memoirs]* (Moscow: Garazh, 2019), Vol. 2, 292-293, 294-2977. Additionally, Eisenstein drew several "friendly caricatures" of Kathleen that emphasized a physical feature also prominently exaggerated in caricatures of Eisenstein by himself and others – a large forehead; see Sergei Eisenstein, Naum Kleiman, ed. *Eizenshtein na bumage: graficheskie raboty mastera kino [Eisenstein on paper: graphic works of the master of cinema]* (Moscow: Ad Marginem press, 2017), 266-275. Perhaps Kathleen's role as a conduit for the sharing of recent American films played a role in the feelings of identification and affection Eisenstein seemed to have for her.

¹⁵ This theory is also suggested – obliquely – by the description of the terms of Eisenstein's acquaintance with Kathleen as described in the aforementioned memoir fragment interpreted by Kleiman. This text takes the form of an allegorical fairy tale of an unhappy "builder of cathedrals" (Eisenstein frequently described his film work in architectural terms and had gone to school for civic engineering at the behest of his architect father) who falls in love with a vivacious "Dollar Princess" (Averell Harriman was a fabulously wealthy banker and railroad "king"). In this piece, which is full of thinly-veiled allusions that Kleiman identifies with other frequent guests of Spaso House circa 1945, Eisenstein describes meeting the "Dollar Princess" when she "visited his newest cathedral" (i.e. attended a screening of his latest film in early 1945) and ending when she

a direct reference to the Embassy film screenings in Eisenstein's writings, but my research is currently limited to that which has been published and an incomplete subset of his unpublished diaries representing what I was able to obtain from RGALI between 2019-2022. Until I am able to access more archival materials, I cannot claim with full confidence that film titles in the planner correspond to Embassy screenings that Eisenstein attended. Films screened at the Embassy were often re-screened at other venues under the auspices of various Soviet institutions such as the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (VOKS).¹⁶ In particular, the films might be shown to students at the All-Soviet State Institute for Cinematography (VGIK) or to film industry workers at the House of Film (Dom Kino) professional club. In 1940-1941, Eisenstein was the nominal chairman of a commission that arranged for VGIK and Dom Kino screenings from the newly established "trophy" collection of foreign films. This much is attested by archival documents published in *Kinovedcheskie zapiski*,¹⁷ but the commission's and Eisenstein's activities after 1941 remain a question for further archival work. The outbreak of war with Nazi Germany upended the Soviet film industry, and I have not yet established how this commission and its activities changed after 1941. A version of this commission is likely to have existed in 1945 and it is reasonable to suppose that Eisenstein was involved in it, though perhaps in a less active role than before, as he was by then fully consumed with work on *Ivan the Terrible*.

For the present, I will set aside the question of where Eisenstein might have viewed the movies named in his planner to focus on assessing how he might have reacted to them, tracing where possible the imprints of these films in his memoirs and theoretical writings. I hope to write more about the Embassy, VGIK, and Dom Kino screenings themselves once I have succeeded in accessing further documentary materials. This paper reflects the early stages of my research in this area, drawing from three main sources: Eisenstein's writings, extant scholarship and published primary sources on Soviet and American cinema and cultural relations in the 1940s, and the films themselves. I will offer below a historico-culturally specific analysis of these films through the lens of Eisenstein's writings, in particular those associated with the major projects he began in 1945-1946, his memoirs and the theoretical treatise *Non-Indifferent Nature*.¹⁸

"went away with her Fatum" (i.e. her inevitable departure at the end of Averell's tenure as ambassador in January 1946). See Eizenshtein, "Katerinki," 294-297.

¹⁶ Todd Bennett, "Culture, Power, and Mission to Moscow: Film and Soviet-American Relations during World War II," *The Journal of American History*, 88, No. 2 (September 2001), 513.

¹⁷ Svetlana Ishevskaya and Denis Viren, eds. "Vyvezti v Belye Stol'by kartiny vysshei i l-i kategorii..." Protokoly zasedaniia Komissii po fondu inostrannykh fil'mov pod predsedatel'stvom Eizenshteina, 1940-1941, ['Send to Belye Stol'by films of the highest and first categories...' Meeting protocols of the Commission for the foreign film fond chaired by Eisenstein, 1940-1941], *Kinovedcheskie zapiski*, No. 86 (2008): 124-152.

¹⁸ The most up-to-date scholarly edition reconstructing Eisenstein's drafts and plans for this work can be found in: Sergei Eizenshtein, Naum Kleiman, ed. *Neravnodushnaia priroda* [*Non-Indifferent Nature*] (Moscow: Muzei Kino, 2004). An English translation of the main four complete chapters of the work (without the additional notes, drafts, and

Eisenstein's planner contains the names of thirty films (twenty-seven features and three shorts) spread across eleven weeks without any discernible regularity or pattern to the dates. I believe that the film titles, as well as the other performances and meetings noted in the planner, were written in advance as a schedule to which Eisenstein, extremely busy with multiple projects and increasingly socially withdrawn, may not have strictly adhered. However, there are fifteen entries which feature symbols above or next to the names that appear to have been added in after the screenings as annotation – the placement, and in some cases, pencil quality, suggest later addition. While studying these films and a large contingent of Eisenstein's contemporaneous writings both published and unpublished, I formed a hypothesis about the meaning of these symbols. It is only a conjecture, but one plausible and compelling enough to stand as my going theory.

There are two recurring symbols, "X" and "T," sometimes appearing in double or triple form ("XXX," "T.T.") next to or above film titles. Throughout his notes, Eisenstein used X's to mark observations and citations of special significance, sometimes accompanying the X's with additional positive indications such as "Great!" It therefore seems likely that the X's placed by film titles in the planner are similar markers of significant interest or positive estimation, with repetition intensifying the sentiment. This conjecture is supported by the fact that several of the films marked with X's do show up in Eisenstein's writings, including two "X" films discussed with interest (and mixed or neutral estimation) and two "XXX" films discussed with strong praise.

The "T." indicator is trickier to decode, but I have settled on the theory that it's a rough antithesis of "X," indicating a negative reaction to the film. The period indicates that "T." (the cyrillic letter G) is an abbreviation for something (unlike "X" which is a conventional symbol of emphasis used without a period). I believe the full word indicated to be *govno* (shit), a word Eisenstein used not infrequently in his letters and diaries to describe works he disliked or judged inadequate.¹⁹ I have found one direct discussion of a "T." film in Eisenstein's writings and it is pointedly critical.

I formed my theories about this "rating system" in the process of viewing the films and judging them against opinions about film, art, and social ethics set out by Eisenstein in his late writings. I then composed brief reports summarizing my observations for each film of the "X" and "T." subsets. These summaries both support my interpretation of Eisenstein's "rating" and offer insights into the director's relationship to Hollywood film during the last years of his life, a period of feverish theoretical and personal investigation. Though he became increasingly

related essays) can be found in Sergei Eisenstein, Herbert Marshall, trans. *Non-Indifferent Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

¹⁹ Among published texts, some illustrative examples can be found in Sergei Eizenshtein, Vladimir Zabrodin, ed. "...zhit' v usloviakh "neustoichivogo ravnovesiia" Pis'ma S.M. Eizenshteina M.M. Straukhu iz-za granitsy. 1929-1931 [...to live in a condition of "unstable balance" Letters from S.M. Eisenstein to M.M. Straukh from abroad. 1929-1931], *Kinovedcheskie zapiski* 60 (2002): 179-212.

reclusive, especially following the banning of *Ivan the Terrible Pt. II* in 1946, he continued to engage with the latest developments in film at home and abroad up until his death in February 1948.

I will arrange my reports in the order of ascending estimation: “Т.Т.Т.” - ““Т.Т.” - “Т.” - “X” - “XX” - “XXX,” using my own discretion to organize the films within each rating category. Most reports will be brief, but a few will be extensive where Eisenstein’s engagement with the films can be traced directly in his later writings. The section headings contain the name of the film as recorded by Eisenstein in quotes followed by the official US release title and information.

“Т.Т.Т.”

“Henry V”: *Henry V* (dir. Laurence Olivier, Two Cities Films, 1944). Sir Olivier’s directorial debut appears to be the only non-American film on the list. Its screening may have been an undertaking of British diplomats, likely at the UK Embassy. Its provenance and release date rule out being a “trophy film” and it was not later given a Soviet release, so if it was being viewed in consideration for one, it underperformed. My guess is that it was a one-off screening arranged in honor of visiting British dignitaries: it was shown on May 12, the anniversary of King George VI’s coronation and three days after May 9, which was marked in Eisenstein’s planner with the note “VOKS. Mrs. Churchill.”

Eisenstein, a lifelong lover of British literature and more recently an ardent student of Elizabethan drama in preparation for *Ivan the Terrible*, must have been extremely disappointed by this emotionally and aesthetically flat interpretation of a Shakespeare play which squanders its precious color film stock on un-cinematic emulation of open-air theater and two-dimensional illustration.

In his writing on color in film, which was a major interest of his from the time of filming the part-color *Ivan the Terrible* up to the final day of his life²⁰, Eisenstein drew a distinction between *tsvetnoe kino* and *tsvetovoe kino*.²¹ This dichotomy might be rendered into English as “color film vs. chromatic film” or “film in color vs. film of color” – linguistically, it opposes two different adjectival forms of the word “color,” conceptually, it distinguishes between film that merely has color as one of its properties and film that uses color consciously as a tool of art. Films of the first category are at best disappointments for failing to realize the full potential of the medium. At worst, they are “color catastrophes” which resemble “bad oleographic prints” to borrow phrases from Eisenstein’s criticism of other

²⁰ Among the papers on his desk at time of death was a letter to his close associate, the director Lev Kuleshov, on the subject of color film. See: Sergei Eizenshtein, “Tsvetovoe kino [Chromatic film],” in Sergei Yutkevich, ed., *Izbrannye proizvedeniia* [Selected works] (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1968), Vol. 3: 579-588.

²¹ This concept was set down in a manifesto titled “Ne tsvetnoe, a tsvetovoe [Not color, but chromatic]” first published in *Kinogazeta* 20, no. 29 (1940).

color films.²² Many shots in *Henry V* do resemble prints – there is an evident attempt to suggest the aesthetic of late medieval illuminated manuscripts. But without the painterly idiosyncracies, twisty Gothic details, surreal perspectives, and bloody violence of medieval illuminations, these shots more closely resemble early-twentieth-century mass-market children’s book illustrations.

“Hunchback of Notre Dame”: *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (dir. William Dieterle, RKO Radio Pictures, 1939). As Eisenstein gave only the name of the film in his notebook, it is up to the researcher to determine which adaptation of Victor Hugo’s *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831) was shown. It seems overwhelmingly likely to have been the 1939 RKO film for three main reasons: one, this film was the most recent one in 1945 and thus of the same time period as the other movies in the planner; two, this is the version that was given a Soviet theatrical release in 1949; and three, the other versions that existed in 1945 were silents and while silents were certainly still screened in some settings, they would have been out of place in the Embassy screenings. I will thus give my criticism of the 1939 film.

Eisenstein returned to Hugo and this particular novel many times in his writings, evidently admiring this work greatly. He seems to have been particularly fascinated with the complex dialectic of horror and amusement characterizing the medieval attitude towards physical deformity depicted at an incipient moment of cultural transition into the early modern era. Eisenstein was probably very disappointed by this film’s apparent lack of interest in provoking terror and amusement in the viewer and engaging them psychologically-emotionally in the reconstruction of a historical moment. The film’s psychological-emotional toolbox is limited to the most predictable and palatable 1930s Hollywood conventions: excitement at danger and intrigue, pity at suffering and romantic yearning. Charles Laughton’s performance as Quasimodo gives the character humanity and pathos but does not horrify or amuse – to effectively adapt Hugo’s complex and deeply historically evocative novel requires the actor to do all these things at once. For someone of Eisenstein’s historically relativistic perspective, it is not the point to show that Quasimodo is not really a monster by modern standards, but rather to demonstrate the social and material reality in which this person is considered a monster. The film privileges the presentist view of triumphant rationalism, positing a clean break with the “superstitious” past that Eisenstein would likely find trite for numerous reasons, including his lifelong interest in magic and other occult practices as ongoing traditions, as well as his view that life follows a cyclical spiral and art must combine forward-thinking experimentation with retrospective exploration of historical forms.

²² Eisenstein, *Non-Indifferent Nature*, 388-90.

“T.I.”

“Tahiti Nights”: *Tahiti Nights* (dir. Will Jason, Columbia Pictures, 1944). This was the only film in the 1945 planner I was unable to view despite my best efforts. It does not seem to have ever been transferred to video and no archive with a publicly-accessible catalog reports owning a copy of the film. It may well be lost, perhaps not unfortunately. The synopsis of the film given by the American Film Institute (AFI) describes a typical cinematic crime of American colonialist racism, a lightly-raunchy musical comedy about the romantic misadventures of American musicians touring the Pacific Islands and making a mockery of supposed local courtship traditions.²³

“Counterattack”: *Counter-Attack* (dir. Zoltan Korda, Columbia Pictures, 1945). Several specimens of the oddball crop of pro-Soviet war-related films made in Hollywood during the brief years of Soviet-American alliance were eagerly purchased by the Soviet government and put into domestic distribution.²⁴ *Counter-Attack* was not, perhaps in part because it came quite late in the game, premiering in the US in April 1945. It appears in Eisenstein’s planner on May thirtieth, twenty-one days after the declaration of victory over Nazi Germany and eight days before the final film listed in the planner. The Soviet government had already spent a fair amount of money on *Mission to Moscow* (dir. Michael Curtiz, Warner Bros., 1943), *North Star* (dir. Lewis Milestone, Samuel Goldwyn Productions, 1943), and *Song of Russia* (dir. Gregory Ratoff, Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer, 1944) in the years prior.²⁵ By 1945, the government was curtailing its purchase of Hollywood films for political as well as financial reasons.²⁶

It’s hard to imagine a Hollywood film about the Red Army that could possibly live up to Eisenstein’s standards in terms of both artistic efficacy and political conscience. Artistically, the film is stylistically simple, failing to break free of its stage-play origins and become something dynamically cinematic. Politically, it’s under-developed, with a strangely bloodless depiction of Soviet-German conflict and a minor plotline involving an enlisted Wehrmacht soldier of proletarian origins developing class consciousness that comes across as a hasty sketch without psychological depth or nuance. Similarly unsatisfying are the film’s brief

²³ “Tahiti Nights,” AFI Catalog of Feature Films, American Film Institute, <https://catalog.afi.com/Film/24612-TAHITI-NIGHTS?sid=953ddec0-e3c9-4b03-a640-ef262b25de98&sr=11.719867&cp=1&pos=0>.

²⁴ *Mission to Moscow* (dir. Michael Curtiz, Warner Bros., 1943) was purchased and released in 1943, *North Star* (dir. Lewis Milestone, Samuel Goldwyn Productions, 1943) and *Song of Russia* (dir. Gregory Ratoff, Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer, 1944) were purchased and released in 1944. For more on the creation and reception of these films, see: Bennett, “Culture, Power, and *Mission to Moscow*,”; and Beth Holmgren, “Russia on Their Mind: How Hollywood Pictured the Soviet Front,” in Choi Chatterjee and Beth Holmgren, eds., *Americans Experience Russia: Encountering the Enigma, 1917 to the Present* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 105-123.

²⁵ G. L. Bondareva, ed. *Kremlevskii kinoteatr. 1928-1953: Dokumenty* [*The Kremlin Movie Theatre. 1928-1953: Documents*] (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2005), 692.

²⁶ Bennett, “Culture, Power, and *Mission to Moscow*,” 516.

invocations of Christian imagery, or rather, vocabulary – the mentions of miracles and faith in the dialogue feel like throwaways, with no real thematic import or creative realization. The minimalist framework – the majority of the film plays out in an empty, caved-in basement and centers on a single soldier’s struggle – has the potential for a neo-Symbolist or metatextual meditation on human psychology, war, and theater. Done as a straightforward Hollywood action-drama, it just feels like a C-production. Its protagonist is a simple and morally flawless war hero created at the intersection of Hollywood crudity and Socialist Realist propaganda, and even Paul Muni’s idiosyncratic charisma and technical acting prowess cannot make something compelling of him. One wonders how the scene in which he pulls out his beloved pocket dictionary (already a trite detail) to reveal that he has literally crossed out the entry for “impossible” went over with an audience of Soviet writers, many of whom (including Eisenstein) used self-censorship as a survival tactic during the violent purges of only a few years prior.²⁷



Fig. 2: Soviet self-censorship?

The film’s own history, which Eisenstein may or may not have known about, is deeply tied up in the histories of both Soviet and American political repression of artists. A well-researched account of the strange history through which an obscure play published in the Soviet Union in 1937 transformed into a modestly

²⁷ The year 1937 is most remembered in connection with Stalin’s deadly purges, but 1940 was the year in which at least two artists very close to Eisenstein (Isaak Babel and Vsevolod Meyerhold) were executed by the state.

successful Broadway play in 1943 and then an ill-fated film in 1945 can be found in Maksim Gudkov, “Sovetskii raritet o voine na amerikanskoi stsene: p’esa I. Vershinina I M. Rudermana ‘Pobeda’ (1943) [A Soviet rarity about war on the American stage: I. Vershinin and M. Ruderman’s play ‘Victory’ (1943)],” *Voprosy teatra*, No. 1-2 (2018): 353-382.

“T.”

“Private Hargrove”: *See Here, Private Hargrove* (dir. Wesley Ruggles, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1944). Eisenstein was a great admirer of the eccentric tradition in American comedy, writing enthusiastically of his encounters with Chaplin, the Marx Brothers, and other vaudevillians and clowns. *Private Hargrove* is a comedy without clowns and utterly lacking in eccentric verve. It’s hardly a comedy at all, more of a lighthearted coming-of-age story about military training with a few jokes included. It may have been selected for an embassy screening with the thought of entertaining military personnel in mind (and Embassy screenings would have both Soviet and US current and former military personnel in significant attendance). Eisenstein did have a brief military career in his youth, which he returned to several times in his memoirs. There is enough overlap between his experience and Hargrove’s (both are young writer-intellecutuals miscast as soldiers, both find themselves adjacent to extensive embezzling schemes cooked up by crooked comrades²⁸) that one can imagine Eisenstein reacting negatively to seeing material of personal significance used to make a vexingly uninspired and uninteresting film.

“KID OF SPAIN”: *The Kid from Spain* (dir. Leo McCarey, Samuel Goldwyn Productions, 1932). This early Eddie Cantor comedy may not stand up to the test of time on its merits as a film, but it is one of the most intriguing entries in the planner from a research standpoint. Most films shown by the US Embassy or purchased by the Soviet government during the war were recent releases of the 1940s. *The Kid from Spain* is a notable exception, significantly older than the other films on this list and other lists of American films shown in the USSR at this time.²⁹ This begs the question: why was it screened? Beginning from the position that perceived audience interest played a role in the selection of the Embassy films, I see two possible sources of motivation for hauling *The Kid from Spain* from the vault (or perhaps just the Spaso House attic). One: the film *Roman Scandals* (dir. Frank Tuttle, Samuel Goldwyn Productions, 1933), the final and most popular Eddie Cantor-Busby Berkeley musical comedy had made

²⁸ See Sergei Eizenshtein, “Mertvye dushi [Dead Souls],” in *Yo. Memuary*, Vol. 1, 144-155.

²⁹ Lists I have consulted include the film listings in *Vechernaia Moskva*, a list of film titles mentioned in connection to Embassy screenings in 1944 in Kathleen Harriman’s letters shared with me by Geoffrey Roberts, and a compiled list of films mentioned in the various secondary sources cited throughout the paper.

it to the USSR and may have been popular enough to inspire interest in seeing a related film.³⁰ Two: several of the Soviet filmmakers who were among the most honored of the guests at these screenings had a well-known affinity for Mexico and one was also the leading Soviet disciple of Busby Berkeley.

Though both motivations could have been in play, I am most interested in considering the latter: that the film was programmed as a special treat of sorts for Grigory Alexandrov (Eisenstein's former assistant director who became a leading director of lighthearted musical comedies after their falling out in the early 1930s) and Eisenstein, who did write the film's name in all capitals (something he did not do anywhere else in the planner). It could well have been a treat for Alexandrov, but seems unlikely to have been enjoyable for Eisenstein, who had a very deep, personal connection to the country treated so frivolously by this thoroughly American film, in which not a single Mexican was a credited contributor. He would, however, have been intrigued (perhaps morbidly) to see this film for various reasons, including the dubious minor role it played in the controversy around his canceled Mexican film project of 1932. The backer for this project, American writer Upton Sinclair, lost trust in the Soviet team of Eisenstein, Alexandrov, and cinematographer Eduard Tisse and took possession of the extensive footage they had shot to create his own film after the trio had been forced to return to the Soviet Union. The release of Sinclair's film, titled *Thunder Over Mexico*, was met with protests from Eisenstein's American friends and admirers. One of these supporters, the writer and dance impresario Lincoln Kirstein, wrote a public letter to Sinclair that included the accusation that he sold some of the Soviet team's footage of a bullfight to Samuel Goldwyn to use in *The Kid From Spain*. Sinclair denied this allegation when pressed by a reporter from *The Motion Picture Herald*.³¹ The Goldwyn film features two bullfight sequences, one a showcase of the American Sidney Franklin, the "bullfighter from Brooklyn" made famous by Ernest Hemingway's *Death in the Afternoon*,³² the other a pantomime farce starring Cantor.

Having examined *The Kid From Spain* alongside the bullfight footage included in Alexandrov's 1979 arrangement of Eisenstein's Mexican footage released as *Que Viva México!*³³, I have to admit that there is nothing in the American film that could plausibly have come from the Soviet team's material. The appearance of the arenas and toreadors in each film are markedly different and there are no shots in *The Kid From Spain* in which neither the arena nor the toreador can be seen. It is still possible, however, that Sinclair may have sold some footage to Goldwyn that

³⁰ I have not been able to verify the Soviet release year for this film (1940) claimed by various non-scholarly sources (IMDB, Wikipedia, cinephile forums). I have seen a digitized copy of the Russian-subtitled Soviet cut that resembles releases of this general time, but the exact date and nature of the release (i.e. public or limited) cannot be determined from it.

³¹ "It's 'Thunder' Over Sinclair Now," *Motion Picture Herald*, September 30, 1933, 14.

³² Sidney Franklin reflected on his role in Cantor's film and Hemingway's book in his autobiography *Bullfighter from Brooklyn: An Autobiography of Sidney Franklin* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1952).

³³ Sergei Eizenshtein, dir. *Que Viva México!*, ed. Grigorii Aleksandrov (Mosfil'm, 1979).

simply did not make it into the final cut of the film. Sinclair's flippant remark to a reporter that "Besides, neither Eisenstein nor Eddie Cantor had any labels on their bulls," leaves me with a vague, yet lingering suspicion. It remains to be seen if any material clues can be found in the relevant archives.

"Chopin": *A Song to Remember* (dir. Charles Vidor, Columbia, 1945).

Eisenstein wrote about this film in a "Postscriptum" to the fourth and final chapter of *Non-Indifferent Nature*. This chapter was written in spring-summer 1945 and the entry for this film (originally titled *A Song to Remember*, but evidently called simply *Chopin* in Russia) in the planner falls on April fifth. The chapter he was then writing takes as one of its central concerns the potentials of musically-structured color cinematography, Eisenstein invokes this film as an example of a recent work that failed to live up to the potential of its material.

The technical mastery of color has barely begun, has yet to be realized and the aesthetics of it have yet to be mastered, even to a modest degree.

And in the light of the "color catastrophes" that almost all color films appear to be today, the theoretical work on the problem of the subject matter of a film, its color and combination with music is very significant.

The definition of a "color catastrophe," as the definition of aesthetic lack of mastery in the application of color in film, unfortunately does not only refer to those film where the color functions only as a recurrent sensation – such as *The Thief of Baghdad* and *The Jungle Book* as well as *The Bathing Beauty* of MGM.

Other such examples, alas, were two pictures of apparently quite different intentions, which chance circumstances led me to watch on two consecutive days at the very height of my work on the Chinese landscape for this article: These are *Bambi* by my friend Disney (a very belated viewing for me) and *Chopin* by Columbia Pictures (1944).

[...]

The second film presents a no less melancholy picture.

Strictly speaking, from the purely plastic aspect of a film, any *general surface of each shot* is a distinct tonal or color "landscape" – not because of what it represents but because of the *emotional feeling* the shot must bear, which itself is perceived as *a whole* within the consecutive course of the montage pieces.

If such shots, as a plastic equivalent, are intended to repeat the course of such profoundly poetic music as Chopin's, then it would seem that it is difficult to find a more charming and delightful problem to solve.

To create a picturesque symphony of tender fading tones (repeating Chopin's nocturnes and preludes) is a charming problem indeed.

Yet what do we see instead in the film *Chopin*?

A jumble of colored fragments with no combination within themselves or with each other, without a logic of the feelings or mood or atmosphere of the scene or, above all, most important of all, most necessary of all, without a unified course of the composer's musical thought!

And again we have before us the stubborn *color variegation* of separate objects instead of a general unrestrained colored space of the suite composed of them.

Again a play of *colored objects*, and not of the *color of the objects*.

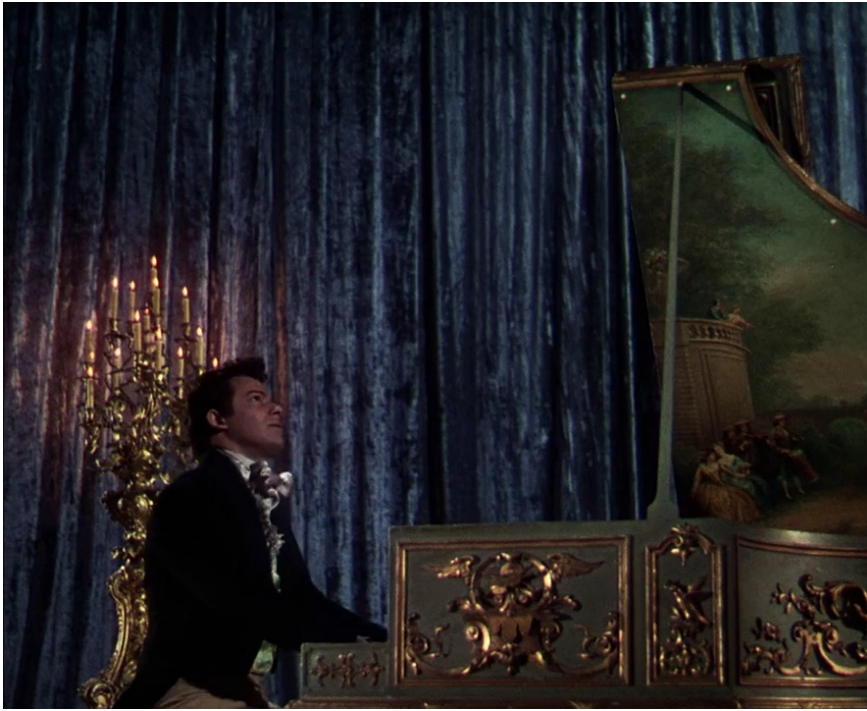
This is particularly scandalous and insulting in the last part of the film, which had been conceived correctly – in *Chopin's* concert tour to collect money for the Polish uprising (I will not go here into an evaluation of the historical veracity of the plot itself). Here the basic musical theme of the film, a polonaise (which is understood as an expression of the national feelings of the Polish people), is played continuously in the music, and at the same time the visual aspect of the episode is being continuously modified through change of European concert halls, where Chopin himself is playing the polonaise on the piano. Dissolving into each other, posters from various cities flash by, the varied forms of the halls, the changing forms of the pianos, the changing costumes of Chopin, which become darker in unison with his growing illness – and mainly the colored velvet backdrop of the background.

Well conceived – but terribly realized. For again the basic concept is forgotten, that *red velvet* cannot turn into *blue velvet*, and *green velvet* into *violet velvet*, *crimson velvet*, or *orange velvet*; and that this can only be done by *color* – easily flowing from *red* into *blue*, from *green* into *violet*, into *crimson*, into *orange*.

The color, and not the velvet.

After this flow of color into color, each color can then freely “materialize” in reverse into surface, texture, folds, the general concreteness of velvet; but musical transitions are accessible only to tonally colored or textured values and not to nailed-up pieces of varicolored plush!³⁴

³⁴ Sergei Eisenstein, *Non-indifferent Nature*, 388-392. I have slightly modified Marshall's translation.



Figs. 3-4: Scenes from a color catastrophe.

Eisenstein's intense frustration at the failure of this film to utilize color as an independent, mobile element not statically affixed to objects is made all the stronger by his personal situation as someone who had been theorizing on color for quite some time without access to color film stock with which to experiment and demonstrate his ideas. It was not until December of 1945 that he was about to obtain enough Agfacolor film (expropriated from Germany as war booty by the Red Army) to film one scene on one set – the fatal feast that became the capstone for *Ivan the Terrible*.³⁵ Eisenstein certainly made his limited foray into full-color film count, carefully planning an audiovisual symphony in which color (not only the color attached to objects, but untethered colored light projected with theatrical gels) moves and transforms, dancing expressively to Prokofiev's score. Unable to continue working with color film after the completion of this sequence, the director continued his work on paper, writing passionately about theoretical methods and subjects for color films until the very end of his life.

If Eisenstein had also included in his critique of *A Song to Remember* "an evaluation of the historical veracity of the plot," he would likely have noted the rather incongruous insertion of a proto-Bolshevik Russian revolutionary agitating for cross-cultural solidarity in the fight against oppression under the tsar. This character, who appears briefly in an underground meeting of Polish rebels that a young Chopin attends, was, it seems, a Soviet creation. One of the letters from Hollywood sent by director and cultural emissary Mikhail Kalatozov to the Chairman of the Committee on Cinema Under the Council of People's Commissars of the Soviet Union Ivan Bolshakov described a meeting with Charles Vidor in which he helped the young director and "friend of the [Soviet] Union" re-work the screenplay he'd been assigned to give a more sympathetic image of the Russian people.³⁶ Kalatozov's anecdote ends with the loaded suggestion that "if the studio bosses don't change their tune following the renewed anti-Soviet campaign in the press regarding the Polish question, the picture will come out perfectly acceptable for us."³⁷ The film was evidently acceptable enough to be screened once in Moscow, but it did not make it into circulation, perhaps due to the Soviet government's increasingly fraught position on "the Polish question."

"X"

"Bambi": *Bambi* (dir. David Hand, Walt Disney Productions, 1942). Eisenstein's writings include several mentions of *Bambi* which suggest the film was of significant interest to him although his evaluation of it is complicated and critical. The single "X" may reflect a certain ambivalence – an abiding love for Disney³⁸ and enthusiasm for the film's concept weigh against his great

³⁵ Oksana Bulgakowa, Anne Dwyer, trans. *Sergei Eisenstein: A Biography* (Berlin: Potemkin Press, 2001), 223.

³⁶ Kalatozov, "'Seks...vydokhsia i vkonets sostarilsia'..." 214.

³⁷ Kalatozov, "'Seks...vydokhsia i vkonets sostarilsia'..." 214.

³⁸ Eisenstein, who had spent time with Disney in Hollywood in 1930, had planned

disappointment in the film's approach to color and landscape. In an early note on *Bambi* dated 3 December 1943, he is quite excited by the concept of a film about the circle of life starring a deer:

Bambi, of course, must not be ignored.

Bambi is already a shift towards ecstasy – serious, eternal: the theme of *Bambi* is the circle of life – the repeating circles of life.

No longer the sophisticated smile of the twentieth century towards totems. But a return to pure totemism and a *Rück-Rück* [reverse shift] towards evolutionary prehistory.

A humanized deer, or rather, *Rückgänglich* [conversely] – a “redeerized” human.

Bambi crowns, of course, the whole study on Disney.³⁹

This was evidently written before viewing the film. The later discussion of *Bambi* dates to mid-1945 and implies that he had just recently seen the film for the first time on the day indicated in the planner. In 1943, he had likely seen concept art (he corresponded with Disney and imported books reproducing his art) and might have been familiar with the original 1923 novel by the Austrian writer Felix Salten. The later discussion is part of the “Postscriptum” to the essay “Non-Indifferent Nature,” cited above in connection to *A Song to Remember*. His criticisms of its approach to color include similar points to those he would attack in the Chopin film (too static and literal, not moving in coordination with music and emotion), but here the locus of his critique falls on the film's painted backdrops and their failure to work with the foreground figures to achieve a stylistic unity fit to the lyrical tone of the film.

[...] I was particularly disappointed with the first film [*Bambi*]– it was so bad in the unmusicality of its *landscape* and *color*.

Disney – is the brilliant master and unsurpassed genius in the creation of audiovisual equivalents in music of the *independent movements of lines* and a graphic interpretation of the inner flow of the music (more often of the melody than of the rhythm!). He is surprising when it is a question of the structure of the comically exaggerated movement of the human characters, the masklike figures of the comic animals, but this same Disney is amazingly blind when it comes to *landscape* – to the *musicality of landscape* and at the same time, to the *musicality of color and tone*.

Already in the early works of Disney, in what I think is the best of

to write a book on the animator. His unfinished drafts and notes for this study have been collected and published in numerous editions and translations since the 1980s. For an English-language scholarly edition, see the section “On Disney” in Richard Taylor, ed., *The Eisenstein Collection* (London: Seagull Books, 2006), 79-184.

³⁹ Quoted from Alan Upchurch's English translation in *The Eisenstein Collection* (2006), 63.

his series, *Silly Symphonies*, I was disturbed by the total *stylistic rupture* between the background, painted in such a weak, childish manner, and the brilliant perfection of the movement and drawing of the moving figures in the – foreground...

[...]

In the Mickey Mouse series – especially the black and white ones – it is somewhat better, for there the landscape is mostly sustained in the linear-graphic manner with a concise black wash of parts of the landscape and background, as was applied in the drawing of Mickey and Minnie.

In addition, one should bear in mind that Disney bears the full responsibility for the failure of the landscape – (we [live-action filmmakers] are forced to chase after effects of real nature and on our knees beg it for symphonic elements of sunsets and sunrises, misty dawns, or the threatening racing of clouds) – whereas he is really the complete master of the atmosphere and the elements of his landscape!

Moreover, the possibilities within the art with which he works provide totally unlimited possibilities for landscape elements – in real transformation – to live and pulsate in the tone and emotions of corresponding action.

Here the real *flow* and *true* formation of landscape are possible, transitions from one element of landscape into another, not only as a meaningless panoramic shot or as a tracking of the camera back from the crude, naturalistic dabs of background, as, let us say, in *Bambi*, where this is very much objectionable.

It is much more than this. It is accompanied by a complete rupture of the stylistic manner between the flat drawing of *conventional* volume in the figures and *the false three dimensionality* of the *setting*, painted with all the painstaking care of a bad oleographic print.

[...]

Here in *Bambi*, where it was no longer a question of the parody of the paradoxical, but of *genuine lyricism*, one should have confined oneself to the soft dissolution of forms in the setting and background, able to pass one into the other and repeat the change of moods, and by this flow, great genuinely plastic music.

In *Bambi* I think the retention of the former mode of Disney's drawing was wrong, with its sharply confined linear contour and the continuous *outlining* of colored areas.

In Disney's earlier works this type of drawing corresponded completely to Mickey's paradoxical charm, which consisted in the very fact that Disney, within the self-contained, concrete representational form subjected it to an immaterial free play of free lines and surfaces. This is one of the basic mechanisms of comedic effect in his works. In *Bambi* it is just the reverse.

Here the most important thing is lyricism.

With a proper resolution of the landscape, figures would genuinely merge with it, a resolution of unrestricted strokes such as we know from Chinese *graphics* – and soft spots of color with indistinct edges. This is also typical of Chinese *painting* in its treatment of fluffy beings – monkeys or fledglings.

What is even more sad and tedious is that this had apparently all been kept in mind in the sketches for the film *Bambi*.

In these sketches a complete harmony between the drawing of a character and the background was projected, but the very way both have been drawn, as well as the color resolutions, follow very closely to what so upset me here.⁴⁰

If in 1943, *Bambi* was supposed to be the “crown” of Eisenstein’s study of Disney, in 1945 it became a crisis point in his estimation of Disney’s art. He evidently considered the earliest, pre-color cartoons the animator’s finest work and seemingly waited in vain for Disney to produce equally dynamic and stylistically unified work in color. *Bambi* was more useful to Eisenstein as a negative example against which to contrast his ideas, but he never fully gave up on Disney, whose way with depicting humanized animals (or animalized humans) and synthesizing motion with melody remained enchanting in spite of his gaudy and insipid backdrops.

“Stormy Weather”: *Stormy Weather* (dir. Andrew. L. Stone, 20th Century Fox, 1943). During his time in the US, Eisenstein repeatedly sought out opportunities to meet with Black Americans and experience their art and culture firsthand. He had hoped to meet the singer, actor, and activist Paul Robeson during his travels and even began to sketch concepts for a film they could make together on the subject of the Haitian revolution.⁴¹ Eisenstein was unable to find backing for the project in Hollywood and his renewed attempt to realize this project in the USSR during Paul Robeson’s first visit in 1935 were likewise unsuccessful. In 1938, following the restructuring of the Soviet film industry and Eisenstein’s return to official favor with the creation of *Alexander Nevsky* (1938), the director hoped to use his new status to revive the possibility of working with Robeson, this time to make something on the subject of “the brotherhood of nations and races” as a cinematic stand against the rise of Fascism.⁴² If such an idea had any chance

⁴⁰ Eisenstein, *Non-indifferent Nature*, 388-391. I have slightly modified Marshall’s translation.

⁴¹ For more on this topic, see Charles Forsdick and Christian Høgsbjerg, “Sergei Eisenstein and the Haitian Revolution: ‘The Confrontation Between Black and White Explodes Into Red,’” *History Workshop Journal* 78, No. 1 (2014), 157-185.

⁴² Eisenstein speaks of this in a letter to Paul and Eslanda Robeson dated April 9, 1938. The letter is reprinted (in Russian translation) in Sergei Eizenshtein, Naum Kleiman, ed. “‘Nadeius’ lichno pozhat’ vashu ruku...’ Iz perepiski S.M. Eizenshteina [‘I hope to personally shake your hand...’ From the correspondence of S.M. Eisenstein],” *Kinovedcheskie zapiski*, 36/37 (1997/98), 336-43: 343. Parts of this letter in its original English are quoted in: Martin B. Duberman, *Paul Robeson* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf,

of success, it was abruptly quashed by the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact the next year.

Eisenstein's eternally frustrated desire to make a film centered around Black revolutionary struggle and anti-racism surely influenced his reactions to the American films prominently featuring Black performers or racial topics that made it the USSR, few and far between as they were. A letter he sent to Paul Robeson and his wife Eslanda in 1937 contains an illustrative remark:

I just watched *Showboat*.⁴³ Paul is a marvel, but only in two or three shots is his face, figure, and personality treated in the way it ought to: there is so much to be made out of him! Picture pretty poor, considering all possibilities in it. Illustrating "All Man River"⁴⁴ – not the best taste: would prefer realistic treatment of Paul singing – song and singing being so marvelous by themselves.⁴⁵

One imagines Eisenstein's reaction to *Stormy Weather* may have included a comparable mix of intrigue and frustration. Here was a dazzling array of Black American musicians and performers from across generations and genres (with Eisenstein's love of eccentric humor and ethnographically-informed dance, one imagines he took particular interest in the artistry of Cab Calloway and Katherine Dunham). But Hollywood is still Hollywood (as Eisenstein sometimes quipped) and the untapped possibilities in this film made by white filmmakers within the racist American studio system are glaring. There is a total lack of engagement with the history and reality of racism, something *Showboat*, no matter how inadequately, did attempt. Especially during the fight against Fascism, Eisenstein would have hoped to see full-fledged anti-racism onscreen.⁴⁶

"GasLight": *Gaslight* (dir. George Cukor, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1944). Eisenstein expressed great interest in psychology throughout his life, reading extensively on the subject and seeking out conversations with many experts from across the field. His personal writings are full of descriptions of self-experiments aiming to examine, diagnose, and repair the inner mechanisms of his own psyche – and his own art. His late writings are especially rich in their explorations of psychology, not only as a force shaping and shaped by art, but as

1988), 222.

⁴³ *Showboat* (dir. James Whale, Universal Pictures, 1936).

⁴⁴ Eisenstein evidently misheard the name of the song "Ol' Man River." Tellingly, his version seems to suggest a vision of shared humanity collectively personified by the river rather than the patriarchal image of an "old man" river.

⁴⁵ My provisional rendering of the text is a composite of two published sources (I have not had the chance to view the originals): a partial English quotation in Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 203-204; and the Russian translation of the entire letter with scholarly commentary in Eisenstein, "'Nadeius' lichno pozhat' vashu ruku..." 342.

⁴⁶ In the above-mentioned letter from April 1938, Eisenstein frames his proposal to direct an anti-racist film with Robeson as the fitting ideological follow up to his "one hundred percent anti-Fascist" film *Alexander Nevsky* (Mosfilm, 1938).

a subject depicted in art. In several pieces written between 1944-7, he notes with interest a rising interest in Anglo-American cinema for depicting psychoanalytic theories and practices as plot material.

In a chapter of his unfinished memoir title “In Loving Memory of the Marquis [DeSade]” written in July 1946, he discusses the brief fad for specifically Freudian psychoanalysis in film:

Oddly enough, this dawn of this fad [for depicting psychoanalysis] comes to cinema very belatedly, unless you count *Geheimnisse einer Seele* [*Secrets of a Soul*] with Werner Krauss (Berlin, 1926).

The real cine-vogue of this topic on the screen coincides with the Second World War, which brought us *Spellbound* and *The Seventh Veil* in the mid-forties, and *Lady in the Dark* somewhat earlier.

And then after this general super-acceptance which had replaced “the height of disdain for psychoanalysis,” the “fashion” suddenly drops off.⁴⁷

These above-mentioned films appear again in several essays begun in 1947, with Hitchcock and *Spellbound* earning especially detailed discussion in an essay on 3-D film⁴⁸ and a chapter draft for an unfinished book on color.⁴⁹ These pieces range beyond the topic of Freudian psychoanalysis towards broader discussion of how film can depict subjectivity and altered states.

Eisenstein brings a number of other recent Anglo-American films and plays into these discussions, but *Gaslight* is not among them. Considering that these were unfinished pieces written in the final year of the director’s life, later edited and published by scholar-archivists, it’s hard to say whether he might have been intending to include it in a later draft. To be certain, the film has many significant elements in common with the films he does discuss – illustration of a psychopathological process as a plotline for a detective mystery, cinematographic attention to textures and volumes, use of deep focus lens and multiple planes of action, a compelling performance by Ingrid Bergman... Perhaps Eisenstein’s single “X” designation for this film indicated a certain ambivalence – there was enough to interest him, but not enough to make it into his writing (though I suspect there could well be a mention in one of his diaries from 1947-8, which I have not yet accessed).

“Hold up the dawn”: *Hold Back the Dawn* (dir. Mitchell Leisen, Paramount Pictures, 1941). In a section of his memoir essay “Epopée,” Eisenstein follows one of his characteristic chains of association from a visit to a film studio vaguely near Bois de Vincennes to the 1917 execution of Mata Hari in the fortress of

⁴⁷ Eizenshtein, “Svetloi pamiati Markiza [In loving memory of the Marquise],” *Yo. Memuary*, Vol. 2, 98.

⁴⁸ Eizenstehin, “O stereokino [On stereofilm],” *Izbrannye proizvedenie*, Vol. 3, 474-8.

⁴⁹ This piece has been printed in several collections, including *The Eisenstein Collection* (2006) in an English translation by Alan Y. Upchurch.

Vincennes to Greta Garbo's portrayal of the infamous dancer-spy in "the first film that [he] saw after stepping for a second time onto the 'promised' land of the United States, having spent six weeks waiting for a visa in the borderland backwater of Nuevo-Laredo (Mexico)."⁵⁰ This reminiscence on *Mata Hari*⁵¹ soon leads him to recall another film, one of the few included in the 1945 planner to also appear in his memoirs:

...This would come two years later.
The concrete bridge doesn't so much connect as separate the two
shores – the US and the Mexican.
We sit on the Mexican side.
A week. A second. A third.
Still there is no permission from the immigration authorities.
Incidentally, anyone who has seen the film *Hold Back the Dawn* will
remember the border anguish of Charles Boyer.⁵²

Behind this passing comparison between his younger self and Georges Iscovescu, the protagonist played by Boyer in the 1941 film, lies a dizzying maze of connections and intersections between art and life in which Iscovescu acts as a cypher for at least four men: Eisenstein (the viewer), Boyer (the actor), Leisen (the director), and Billy Wilder (the screenwriter). In the current article, I do not have the space to venture too deeply into this maze, but I will attempt to relate an aerial view and a few choice close-ups.

Iscovescu is a Romanian-French gigolo who attempts to enter the U.S. from Mexico after fleeing war-torn Europe, and later sells his story to a Hollywood director in order to obtain the money needed to pay back the self-sacrificing woman he married for the sake of getting a quick visa, and later came to love in spite of himself. His depiction – and the film overall – wavers between sardonic cynicism and sentimental melodrama. Though the clash between Wilder's sardonic writing and Leisen's sentimental directing may inspire frustration in some audiences, such a dialectical tension was probably for Eisenstein a feature rather than a bug. The wavering tone produced by the interplay of tragedy, cynicism, romance, and optimism often feels akin to the complex ironies at play in Eisenstein's simultaneously self-effacing and self-aggrandizing, highly theatrical "written for the drawer" memoirs. For both Iscovescu (as framed by the script, which features significant first-person retrospective monologue) and Eisenstein (as framed by his memoirs), this ironic wavering is closely connected to the struggle to situate himself morally and ethically: he is in a tragic position, yes, but all around he witnesses greater tragedies and has done too much wrong in his life to feel deserving of pity. Iscovescu is by rights a refugee from Nazi occupation but neither he nor the film itself invokes such a charged framing. He gives his motivations for emigration as simply economic ("It was an easy life [...])

⁵⁰ Eizenshtein, "Épopée," *Yo. Memuary*, Vol. 1, 211-2.

⁵¹ *Mata Hari* (dir. George Fitzmaurice, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1931)

⁵² Eizenshtein, "Épopée," *Yo. Memuary*, Vol. 1, 212.

but the war came. People who had money made for America.”) and avoids further mention of the war. As a cosmopolitan living a marginal, not-quite-legal existence as an entertainer (implied to be a sex worker), he does not share in the grief for a lost homeland or the zeal for American assimilation that characterize the typical refugee narratives unfolding around him in the other rooms of the hotel by the border. The hotel’s name, “*Esperanza*,” is itself simultaneously earnest and ironic. In his love for wordplay and portents, Eisenstein would enjoy such a gesture, not unlike his whimsical selection of a tiny guesthouse named “*Hôtel États-Unis* [Hotel United States]” in Paris, where he stayed while waiting to receive his first US visa.⁵³

Eisenstein’s memoirs (and some of his personal letters) are suffused with a profound sense of displacement that does not align with the typical immigrant emotional narratives. Though he was displaced from his birthplace by the Russian Civil War, he expresses little nostalgia for Riga and indeed was eager to escape his father’s home and build his own destiny in the metropolises of St. Petersburg and Moscow. The geographical displacement that became a life-defining trauma for Eisenstein came later and followed a path much less often tread by romantic narrativization: forced repatriation to the Soviet Union from the country that he had taken with such passion that he was accused of desertion by his home government. That country was, of course, the one that Iscovescu and all his neighbors at the Hotel *Esperanza* were trying to escape: Mexico. Eisenstein’s own “border anguish” in Mexico was of a very different cast – he was reluctantly leaving at his home government’s demand, but his route home through New York required a transit visa to re-enter the US after leaving under somewhat “scandalous” circumstances the year before.

Perhaps this element of “scandal” fanned by American prejudice against Eastern Europeans and the sexually “deviant” bridges the gap between Eisenstein’s experience and Iscovescu’s. Eisenstein’s time in the US had been marked by harassment from reactionaries clamoring for the deportation of the “Jewish” “Bolshevik” “Messenger from Hell;”⁵⁴ his time in Mexico was troubled by his financial sponsor Upton Sinclair’s intolerant response to Eisenstein’s personal and artistic interest in exploring homosexuality.⁵⁵ Similar elements appear in different

⁵³ Eizenshtein, “Epopée,” *Yo. Memuary*, Vol. 1, 172

⁵⁴ Such was the language of Major Frank Pease, the Los Angeles-based fascist activist who led a campaign against Eisenstein.

⁵⁵ Eisenstein’s memoirs and correspondences contain this story in a fractured and cryptic form which has been un-puzzled into comprehensible accounts by scholars including Oksana Bulgakowa, *Sergei Eisenstein: Eine Biografie* (Berlin: Potemkin Press, 1998); Harry M Geduld and Ronald Gottesman, eds. *Sergei Eisenstein and Upton Sinclair: The Making & Unmaking of Que Viva Mexico!* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970); Natalia Ryabchikova, “The Flying Fish: Sergei Eisenstein Abroad, 1929-1932,” (PhD dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 2016); and Masha Salazkina, *In Excess: Sergei Eisenstein’s Mexico* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009). Upton Sinclair describes his side of the story in a letter making frequent derogatory use of the word “homo” to Eisenstein’s first English-language biographer and personal acquaintance Marie Seton. She printed the letter in full in Marie Seton, *Sergei Eisenstein, a Biography* (New York: A. A. Wynn, 1952), 515-16.

forms in Iscovescu's story: the racist quota system (and, implicitly, the US's reluctance to accept refugees fleeing Nazi aggression in the early 1940s) keeps him waiting for a visa and his sexual history ("some scandal in the papers about me and a lady from New York," his career as a gigolo, his implicitly ambiguous sexuality, and his hasty seduction of an American schoolteacher) makes him a target for hounding by immigration authorities.

Hold Back the Dawn does not take place entirely on the US-Mexican border, however, and the sequences set in the interiors of the two countries seem likely to have been just as interesting to Eisenstein. The opening and later scenes of Iscovescu at Paramount studios begging a director he once met in France (Mitchell Leisen playing himself⁵⁶) for financial help and later being whisked away by an immigration officer were scenes as close to Eisenstein's own life as those set at the Hotel *Esperanza*.



Fig. 5: "You stick to directing pictures and let me direct the traffic across the border."

The sequence in Mexico may have less obvious analogues to Eisenstein's life, but the connection may be all the more deep for its resonance on the symbolic and conceptual plane. Iscovescu travels into Mexico to take his new wife Emmy (Olivia de Havilland) on a "honeymoon" away from the prying eye of the

⁵⁶ Leisen's character is called "Mr. Saxon," but the movie he is shooting when Iscovescu accosts him is Leisen's own *I Wanted Wings* (Paramount, 1941) starring Veronica Lake.

immigration inspector. At the start of the trip, he doesn't love her, seemingly has never really loved anyone, but across a series of encounters with Mexico – its heat, its ocean, people, its spirituality, its music – he finds himself in love with Emmy, body and soul. In his letters from Mexico to his closest friends, Eisenstein describes a similar discovery of the ability to fully love another, both physically and emotionally, to “go all the way” in his wording.⁵⁷ In his memoirs, he does not unfold the intimate details of this episode, but speaks extensively and poetically of the transformational effects of his encounters with the Mexican landscape, people, and culture.

“XX”

“Random Harvest”: *Random Harvest* (dir. Mervyn LeRoy, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1942). The only “XX” entry is a very intriguing film in regards to its potential connections to Eisenstein, though I have not found a direct discussion of it in his writings. Similar to *Gaslight*, this is a film about a psychological problem that is “solved” in parallel with the resolution of a mystery-melodrama plot that would fit well into one of his pieces on psychology and detective work as artistic devices and subjects. And there may well be some mention of this film somewhere in the great store of still-unpublished archival materials in Eisenstein’s archive. Perhaps this mention would be in a diary rather than a draft for a piece intended for a book – in addition to the heavy overlap with recurring topics in Eisenstein’s late theoretical work, *Random Harvest* is laden with elements of potential personal resonance, including intimate topics he rarely discussed outside of his private journals and letters.

The film’s protagonist is a British WWI veteran (played by Ronald Colman) with traumatic amnesia who accidentally escapes a mental institution and becomes involved in a dramatic love affair with a music hall performer, Paula (played by Greer Garson). He is instantly taken with this beautiful young woman who happens to be the first person to treat him like a normal person. The night Paula and “John Smith” meet, she stars in a saucy stage routine whose humor and titillation stems from her dancing in a modified Scottish military uniform with a very short kilt while belting out a throaty impersonation of a lusty lad in love with a lass called Daisy. Smith is watching Paula’s performance from the wings and towards the end of the number he faints. Someone with Eisenstein’s deep interest in bisexuality, gender transformations, and sex and dance as means of ecstatically escaping the self would surely have read the subtexts of this scene. The queer (or *bisex*, to use Eisenstein’s preferred umbrella term for phenomena relating to androgyny, gender non-conformity, and homosexuality) implications of Paula’s performance and Smith’s surrender of consciousness don’t portend a simple path to heterosexual bliss for the heroes, situated as they are in socio-historical conditions under which queerness is pathologized and marginalized.

⁵⁷ See Salazkina, “Going All the Way” in *In Excess: Sergei Eisenstein’s Mexico*, 90-138, especially 129-138.

Indeed, non-normative sexual pathology seems to be a side effect of Smith's mental trauma, or at the very least an undercurrent of the film's melodrama. Once Paula knows of his condition, she begins to fuss over him more in the manner of mother than lover, and when they do fall in love, the mother-son dynamic persists in subtle ways. The romantic cliché "my life began with you!" is literal in Smith's delivery – he came to her with no memories or identity and let her shape him into a new person. When an accident reverses Smith's memory loss so that he goes back to where he was mentally before the war injury that caused his amnesia, his old personality is revealed to be a wealthy businessman's son with a conceited personality and sexual pathology in line with theories of the decadent disintegration of the ruling class. He – real name Charles Rainier – is the object of his teenage step-niece's adolescent infatuation and decides to marry her when she becomes of age, a decision the family supports. When they later break their engagement and admit they're not fit for each other, it's not because they're related and decades apart in age, but because Rainier is too haunted by not knowing who he was during his three-year lapse in memory to be a properly attentive husband. As Rainier continues to pursue a high-powered business-and-politics career, he realizes he needs a wife for the sake of projecting normalcy and managing his social affairs. He makes a predictable move and proposes marriage to his secretary – who is actually the accidentally estranged Paula trying to stay close to him while waiting to see if his memory comes back. The final act of the film depicts the turmoil of a "paper marriage" in which a pining wife longs for intimacy with a husband who is not in love with her. Lest the viewer fail to grasp the gay subtext, there is a scene of the two sitting stiffly through a performance of *Swan Lake* to summon an association with Tchaikovsky, whose sexuality and related marital problems had been indelibly linked to his image in the Anglophone world since at least the turn of the twentieth century.⁵⁸

The tragic situation is quickly and wholly resolved in the last few minutes of the film, a Hollywood convention only worth discussing because it positions the abandonment of ruling class loyalties as the beginning of the chain reaction that ends with Rainier/Smith getting back his full memory and love for his wife. There is a strike at one of Rainier's factories and he goes to oversee negotiations – and sides with the workers. In a rush of fraternity, the former snob goes with his victorious workers into town for a drink... It turns out this Midlands factory town is the very one where he and Paula first met. The familiar surroundings jog his memory and everything works out from there.

It is difficult to guess what feelings such a film might have provoked in Eisenstein, but it seems unlikely to have simply washed over him without activating a few nerves. He had intensely complicated relationships with his parents, class background, and sexuality. In many autobiographical writings, he credits the October Revolution and his decision to join the Red Army with freeing him from the soul-warping dead-end of a bourgeois life on the path mapped out for

⁵⁸ See Richard Taruskin, "Pathetic Symphonist: Chaikovsky, Russia, Sexuality, and the Study of Music," in *On Russian Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 76-104.

him by his father. In an enigmatic quotation set down by his first biographer Marie Seton, the focus shifts away from his father and towards a literary predecessor: "Had it not been for Leonardo, Marx, Lenin, Freud and the movies, I would in all probability have been another Oscar Wilde."⁵⁹ This quotation might be reductively (mis)construed as a rejection of homosexuality as bourgeois,⁶⁰ but Eisenstein's complex understanding of Wilde (not to mention Leonardo and Freud...) and of sexuality as reflected in his memoirs, diaries, and personal letters problematize such a reading. I do not have space for a full account here, but his writings on *bisex* treat non-normative sexuality as a morally neutral phenomenon that may be a psychological prerequisite for artistic and spiritual genius. This genius, in turn, could be channeled into creation in either a mystical, inward-gazing vein or a materialist, socially-engaged one. While not discrediting the value of mysticism in certain doses, Eisenstein championed the materialist path. The tragedy of Wilde he was glad to avoid was not being queer so much as squandering his queer gifts on disengaged aestheticism, rather than revolutionary social change.

If *Random Harvest*'s depiction of a tragic queer-coded upper-class scion finding the ability to love after turning towards the working class presents warped-mirror parallels to Eisenstein's experiences in a broad sense, one imagines that he must have caught a strange reflection indeed in the scenes presenting a "paper marriage" between a sexually withdrawn man and his devoted secretary. Eisenstein's own marriage to his assistant and close friend Pera Atasheva was not widely known during his lifetime. It was, by most accounts, a platonic partnership of necessity; but if Rainier and Paula agreed to a public "merger" in the interest of pursuing wealth and power under capitalism, Eisenstein and Atasheva agreed to a private compact in the interest of protecting the director and his legacy from erasure under a version of state socialism that looked with increasing suspicion on men without registered wives and could not be trusted to execute Eisenstein's will regarding his archive in the event of his death without a designated heir.⁶¹ That is,

⁵⁹ Marie Seton, *Sergei M. Eisenstein, a Biography*, 119.

⁶⁰ Though I largely agree with Simon Karlinsky's description of Eisenstein in "Russia's Gay Literature and Culture: The Impact of the October Revolution" in Martin Bauml Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncy, Jr., eds. *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past* (New York: New American Library, 1989) and greatly admire the pioneering anti-homophobic work done in this essay and other works by Karlinsky, I take issue with his use of this quotation to suggest that "Eisenstein may have internalized the homophobia of the Russian and international Communist movements." Seton's biography, while very pioneering and important in its time, was already by Karlinsky's time becoming outdated and problematic, informed by personal bias and based largely on credulously-conducted interviews and without recourse to Eisenstein's unpublished writings and personal papers, which frequently contradict his public statements. Eisenstein's relationship to sexuality and for that matter the Russian and international Communist movements was deeply complicated and best understood on its own terms, that is, bisexually and dialectically.

⁶¹ For descriptions of Eisenstein and Atasheva's relationship by people who knew them both closely, see: Lina Voitolskaia, "Dva goda [Two years]," *Prostor*, No. 6 (1967), 62-73; Viktor Shklovsky, "Pera Atasheva," in *Eizenshtein* (Moscow: Iskusstv, 1973), 178-180; and Iudif Glizer, "Eizenshtein i zhenshchiny [Eisenstein and women]," *Kinovedcheskie zapiski*, No. 6 (1990), 119-134. For scholarly work on sexuality and the early Soviet state, see: Dan Healy, "Homosexual Existence and Existing Socialism:

of course, only the broad strokes suggested by correspondences and memoirs, but it is already much more complex than the “paper marriage” depicted in *Random Harvest*.

Random Harvest’s queer and political themes are not developed with anywhere near the nuance Eisenstein brought to these issues, but he would hardly have expected such things from Hollywood. However shallow in its treatment of complex issues, Hollywood was still fascinating to him, especially when it trained its camera-eye on the warped pathologies of the Anglo-American upper classes, so similar to those in the Russian Empire of Eisenstein’s upbringing in their broad shapes, so distinct in their geographical textures and historical nuances.

“XXX”

“Star Spangled Rhythm”: *Star Spangled Rhythm* (dir. George Marshall, Paramount Pictures, 1942). Of the three “XXX” films, two are invoked in discussions of artistic philosophy in several of Eisenstein’s posthumously-published essays. *Star Spangled Rhythm* is not. This frothy studio showcase musical looks rather odd next to the other two films, which are both wartime dramas centered around the search for meaning in death and loss. But Paramount’s early entry in the patriotic morale-booster genre offered Eisenstein something less high-minded but perhaps equally moving: a rollicking fantasy of righteous reprisal in which the management of the Hollywood studio that once sorely mistreated him is humiliated and outwitted by a clownish has-been of the silent era in cahoots with a crew of merry young sailors and an eccentric, sexually voracious switchboard girl.

It’s easy to imagine Eisenstein identifying with the character of “Bronco Billy” Webster (played by Victor Moore), the former star of silent Westerns now a bashful and physically awkward middle-aged man who shares many traits with the director’s auto-caricatures and certain descriptions of himself in his memoirs. One might also recall the Western (The American Southwest and Mexico) setting of Eisenstein’s most wistfully remembered glory days, and in particular the photographs he took in local costume. That Billy Webster is the father of a sailor is fitting to Eisenstein’s tendency to refer to his film projects as children, with *Battleship Potemkin* being his most successful and well-known “offspring.” This identification would make it all the more satisfying to watch “Bronco Billy” get the best of the high-strung Paramount executive producer – nevermind that the film’s “BG Desoto” corresponds to the EP in place in 1942 (Buddy DeSylva), the character is a recognizable and recurring “type” Eisenstein knew well from his

New Light on the Repression of Male Homosexuality in Stalin’s Russia,” *GLQ: Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 8, No. 3 (2002), 349-78; and Ira Roldugina, “‘Why Are We the People We Are?’: Early Soviet Homosexuals From the First-Person Perspective: New Sources on the History of Homosexual Identities in Russia,” in Richard C. M. Mole, ed. *Soviet and Post-Soviet Sexualities* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 16-31.

time in America the previous decade.⁶² The ridiculous, duplicitous reversals of favor and fortune lampooned in the showbiz comedy plot of *Star Spangled Rhythm* resonate with the sardonic observations made by the Soviet director in letters sent from Hollywood as well as his later-in-life reflections on the experience of being lavishly flattered at industry banquets by the same executives who shot all his proposed film projects to pieces behind closed doors.



Fig. 6: Bronco Billy watches Polly do “it” for defense.

In the tradition of studio-showcase musicals, the showbiz plot is merely the lightweight frame upon which star-studded variety acts are arranged, and these acts contained a fair bit which Eisenstein could relish. There is the double-entendre-packed comedy number “I’m Doing It for Defense” that Betty Hutton as Polly the wanton switchboard operator belts out perched atop of a suggestively bucking jeep and the similarly erotically-charged mass dance number “On the Swing Shift” set in an aircraft factory to tickle his fancy for bawdy humor and the playful sexualization of objects like jeeps, jets, and rivet guns. There is vaudevillian gender-bending and slapstick homoeroticism in several of the acts comprising the “revue” the Paramount stars stage for the sailors in the film’s second half – most notable is the verse in the opening number, “A Sweater, a Sarong, and a Peek-A-

⁶² It may be worth noting that this character is played by the very actor, Walter Abel, who incarnated another of Eisenstein’s greatest American foes in *Hold Back the Dawn*, where he plays the hard-nosed immigration inspector dogging the European protagonist.

Boo Bang,” in which the three leading ladies who are the performers and subject of the song (Paulette Goddard, Dorthy Lamour, and Veronica Lake) are replaced with a trio of male character actors in wigs (Arthur Treacher, Walter Catlett, and Sterling Holloway⁶³). Also sure to captivate Eisenstein was the number showcasing Black artists, “Sharp as a Tack,” which brought together the eccentric comedy of Eddie “Rochester” Anderson (who wears an exaggerated zoot suit and uses a telephone lavishly installed in his side car to communicate with his motorcycle driver) and the syncretic modern dance of performer-choreographer-anthropologist Kathrine Dunham.

“Human Comedy”: *The Human Comedy* (dir. Clarence Brown, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1943). In the essay “Non-Indifferent Nature” Eisenstein briefly invokes this film as an admirable example of contemporary American narrative art that has developed an intricate polyphonic style:

From the time of Sherwood Anderson, American literature has moved far ahead on this path [away from adherence to strictly-defined, intrigue-based plots], outlined in many ways by his stories. Such magnificently charming things as Saroyan’s *The Human Comedy* (the novel and the film) are completely free not only of intrigue, but even of a normally unfolding plot: They seem to be independent episodes all strung out one after another – often without beginning or end; in fact, they represent the most refined interweaving of the fabric of a single thematic picture, which is maintained strictly by one *inner* system of lyrical leitmotifs, just as a play of Scribe or a detective novel maintains *external* peripeteias of dizzy intrigue in a single unified tension.⁶⁴

In this section of a wide-ranging essay on the nature of art, Eisenstein traces the development of polyphonic narrative from the simple literalism of epistolary fiction with its clearly demarcated individual voices to the intricate methods of modernist composition weaving multiple perspectives into a single fabric. Works such as Joyce’s *Ulysses*, one of Eisenstein’s most beloved contemporary novels, seem at first an impenetrably solid surface (particularly those passages without punctuation or paragraph breaks) but upon close examination are carefully woven from a multitude of threads which can be followed in the same manner as a detective examining and comparing various testimonies and documents or a hunter tracing its quarry through dense foliage. Such intellectual searching is one of the most basic and central of human impulses that finds gratification in art and is present at all stages of development of a given medium or genre. Eisenstein identifies the modernist turn at the beginning of the twentieth century as one in

⁶³ Confirmed bachelor Sterling Holloway voice-acted in numerous Disney productions, including several Eisenstein knew, most notably *Bambi*, in which he played the older version of the swishy skunk pointedly named “Flower.”

⁶⁴ Eisenstein, *Non-Indifferent Nature*, 268. I have slightly modified Marshall’s translation.

which existing art forms in the Western world were reaching the end of a life cycle that began with simple forms (comparable to a single knot in a string) and ended with a floridly intricate chaos of polyphonic “woven” forms (comparable to a tapestry). But cinema as a newborn art inherited the lessons learned in other arts and repurposed them with fresh vigor.

Eisenstein’s writings, especially those related to the treatise *Non-Indifferent Nature*, place great emphasis on the close correspondence between cycles of life and patterns in art. These cycles and patterns also correspond internally: the single human life cycle modeling the trajectory of entire generations, classes, societies, and nations; the evolution of one artist’s oeuvre rhyming with the progression of entire movements, genres, and media. Artistic depiction of life cycles, then, had the potential to reveal deep truths about the societies and media that produced them.

Eisenstein’s high estimation of *The Human Comedy* in the citation above praises its formal artistic structure reflecting the achievement of a lyrical epos unified along non-linear motivic correspondences rather than a throughline “plot” in film. It seems likely he also found something to appreciate in the depictions of life the film contains. The setting is a semi-pastoral idyll in which the California Central Valley of screenwriter William Saroyan’s working-class up-bringing becomes a cradle of all humanity, populated by farmstead families of a panoply of ethnic backgrounds living in harmony. The virtues displayed by characters in their shining moments are those Eisenstein praised in his speech on American film given in 1942: “Vivacity and diligence, optimism and enterprise, ardor and clear-eyed simplicity.”⁶⁵

But perhaps more significant are the minor-key passages, the moments of weakness, doubt, and pain that weave throughout this cinematic song-cycle. One of the recurring leitmotifs is the death of sons (the film begins not long after the US entry into the war). Eisenstein did not have children, but this theme was of great personal meaning for him. It can be found throughout his work, from the early scenes of police murdering children in front of their parents in *Strike* and *Battleship Potemkin* to the death of Vladimir Staritsky brought about by his mother’s regicide plot. In his life, he did suffer great losses and the image of the grieving parent haunts his reflections on the premature deaths of his students Kazbek Uruimagov (1909-1938) and Valentin Kadochnikov (1911-1942), as well as the destruction of his film projects. The untimely demise of his Mexican film project was especially traumatic, happening at such a hopeful early phase of his career and under such terrible circumstances as forced repatriation from a place where he had found freedom, inspiration, and love. He recalls this moment of despair in a memoir essay composed after the death of his own mother in August 1946, “After the Rain on Thursday”:

I remember myself in a narrow compartment on the Moscow – Vladikavkaz train.

⁶⁵ Eizenshtein, “Amerikanskaia kinomatografiia i ee bor’ba s fashizmom,” 182.

Only just torn away from my Mexican child.
And a wail in my chest: let me have schizophrenia.
Since in that condition there is no difference between objective
observation and imagined observation.⁶⁶

There is a scene early on in *The Human Comedy* which seems very likely to have resonated with the Eisenstein still mourning the loss of his “Mexican child” over a decade later. A Mexican mother (played by lyric soprano Ann Ayars) receives notice that her son has died in the war. She begins to cry as she moves to a rocking chair, but once seated she tilts back her head, drawing back the tears with a breath, and begins to sing “Cielito Lindo” in the manner of a lullaby. She rocks back and forth and as she comes to the chorus, she looks down to the hand that holds the telegram. As she sings the first half of the chorus (*Ay ay, ay, ay, canta y no llores* [Ay, ay, ay, ay, sing and don’t cry]), the screen briefly darkens and then brightens: the half of the screen occupied by the mother in her chair has dissolved into a shot of the same space, but with light shining through the window and a younger version of the mother in the chair, smiling and holding an infant. As she sings the second half of the chorus, there is a slow dissolve back to the original shot of the older mother in a darkened room staring down into the hand that cradles the telegram. I may be biased as someone with childhood memories of Mexican songs, but I find this to be the most emotionally and artistically effective scene in the whole film, powerfully weaving together the two contrasting shots of life and death with music as the weft.

⁶⁶ Eisenstein, “Posle dozhdika v chetverge [After the rain on Thursday],” in *Yo. Memuary*, Vol. 2, 298-303: 299.



Figs. 7-8: Objective observation and imagined observation.

By a coincidence that speaks to both the primacy of the image and the social reality of the ongoing war, Eisenstein was himself in 1945 editing a film with two scenes of a mother singing the same lullaby over her son, first when he is alive, and then when he is dead. The scenes of Efrosinia Staritskaya singing to Vladimir Staritsky in *Ivan the Terrible, Pt. II* function very differently in the plot structure and moral universe of that very different film – the pathos of the grieving-mother-image is cross-cut with disgust at the ruthless boyarina's active role in the destruction of her pitiful child-man son. And yet, the depiction of the wretched Staritskys evokes pity, in part because it uses such primitively powerful imagery, in part because it is steeped in Eisenstein's personal pain. It was the last time he would depict a mother and son, a painfully ambiguous final statement on a complex tangle of traumas for which there could be no resolution.



Figs. 9-10: Staritskaya's lullaby.

“A Guy Called Joe”: *A Guy Named Joe* (dir. Victor Fleming, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1943). Of all the films in the planner, this one left the greatest imprint in Eisenstein’s writing. The powerful resonance of its portrayal of death, love, and the collective human struggle for freedom with the director’s deepest emotional and intellectual concerns deserves a separate essay of its own. Here I am limited to providing a small compilation of the most essential observations and citations.

Of the latter there are two. One is a passage in an untitled essay given the title “*Perevertyshi* [Inversions]” by the compilers of the director’s posthumous publications and usually assigned to his memoirs. The manuscript for this piece is dated 30 July 1946.

Biologically, we are mortal.

And immortal only in our social deeds; in that small contribution made by our personal run in the relay-race of social progress from the outgoing generation to the generation coming in.

[...]

The field of application for such a concept is now endlessly wider than just that sixth part of the world, where it exists not just as words!

See how coherently a sermon of this new image of immortality sounds from the American [movie] screen, true, only beginning from the moment that Uncle Sam found himself in need of the human power required to direct and fly planes and sacrifice oneself in the context of war.

A Guy Named Joe, in which the dead, fallen, crashed aviators sit behind the backs of the novices and use their store of experience, paid for in ruin, catastrophe, and the price of life, to lead host after host of young pilots to the heavens.

[...]

But the sermon on the theme is placed in the mouth of the “heavenly general” who dispatches crashed pilots back to the planes of novices.

And the idea that the hand of each new pilot is directed by the thousands who perished before him, is here elevated to pathos.

Even though this speech is given grumbly by Lionel Barrymore in his characteristic voice and received by a sardonically squinting Spencer Tracy in the image of the fallen pilot Joe⁶⁷, who receives an assignment to return to earth and invisibly direct the actions of a young pilot.

But there is also a fundamental difference. We do not see immortality as cooperation of older and younger generations beyond the grave.

We see immortality in the goal for which generations fight and die.

⁶⁷ Spencer Tracy’s character is actually named Peter and the title refers to the conventional name of the American everyman, a mantle which the prideful Peter rejects in life, but comes to accept after death.

And that goal is the very human freedom for which we believed, in the heat of war, that our allies also fought.

When the smoke of battle cleared, we saw that in a peaceful context, beyond the thundering of guns, one and the same words could apparently mean entirely different things.

Our ideal of revolutionary struggle, revolutionary life in the name of true freedom turned out to be entirely different from that which our allies flaunted on their flags.

And the formula by which we understand immortality again and again is emphatically defined as immortality in the struggle for the revolutionary ideal of freedom.⁶⁸

The other passage is a longer digression within an essay devoted to the actor Iudif Glizer – a lifelong friend of Eisenstein’s as well as a significant figure in early Soviet theatre. This essay, not published in Eisenstein’s lifetime, dates to March 1947 and contains much rumination on the craft of acting and artistic creation broadly. *A Guy Called Joe* enters as an illustration of a key principle of the artistic philosophy he observes in Glizer’s acting but quickly becomes a wider-ranging meditation. I will quote the full passage here even though it is long because there has not yet been published an English translation of the essay.

I saw a beautiful American war film.

Like many films of recent years – it’s fantasy.

But it’s the sort of concrete, “businesslike” fantasy which is so typical for Americans, so charming in their plays and film scenarios.

The film’s hero is a military pilot, an American sent to Britain. At the end of the first reel, he crashes to his death. Seemingly, this is how films end.

Nothing of the sort: actually, this is where the film really begins.

Immediately after the crash we see him walking through a wide open landscape.

In this landscape there is nothing except space itself. If you don’t count the boundless expanse of sky with no horizon line and the stuff – not quite morning fog and not quite cotton batting – playing about his feet.

There is one of his colleagues in an identical leather jacket walking alongside him.

They’re having a lively conversation.

About this and that.

And mostly about nothing at all.

Then suddenly the hero – he’s called Joe – has a sudden recollection.

“Now hold on! Didn’t you crash last year? You can’t be alive!”⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Sergei Eizenshtein, “[Perevertyschi [Inversions]]” in *Yo. Memuary*, 202-3.

⁶⁹ Eisenstein’s recollection of certain details understandably differs somewhat from the actual film. I have given a translation of his version of the dialogue rather than using the actual lines from the film.

“And what about you?” his friend answers, “Alive? You also crashed yesterday...”

Joe is very confused and wants to know what comes next.

It turns out that “up above” everything is the same as on earth.

And downed pilots must go to the heavenly HQ of downed pilots and report to the chief of staff.

The chief of staff is a general (played by Lionel Barrymore), another distinguished pilot who went down in a military plane crash.

It turns out there is nothing like heavenly leisure and longed-for rest awaiting poor Joe in the afterlife.

Work continues.

He (like all his comrades) receives orders to return back to earth.

In a capacity that’s not quite guardian angel, not quite instructor, but at any rate – an invisible someone assigned to a young pilot who is just getting ready to make their first meaningful independent flights.

The scene of the first flight is excellently done!

The dead pilot sits behind the young one.

In the place an instructor usually sits.

The young pilot doesn’t see him.

But he hears his instructive voice.

To him, this voice seems to be something like remembered lines from a textbook or the voice of his own inner savvy.

But it’s not just a matter of the technical details of airmanship.

The main thing the senior expounds on to the junior is this: the inspired splendor that fills a person who shoots into the heavenly heights, the intoxicating pride which takes hold of a person who has conquered the expanse beyond the clouds, the creative ecstasy which envelops a person who masterfully plunges into the depths and reaches of the heavenly ocean.

And we see how, as if in tune with the words, an unprepossessing, so earthly and awkward little pilot is transformed before our eyes into an inspired enthusiast, the poet of the air and conqueror of heavenly plains, such as were and will be hundreds of pilots minor and great, great and magnificent, like our Chkalov, who so rigorously bore the inextinguishable flame of that very enthusiasm into the vast open skies.

Such a scene can be played, of course, by the deceptively prosaic-looking Spencer Tracey and the freckled [Van Johnson.]⁷⁰

And the firm MGM, of course, invited those particular actors to play this unforgettably beautiful scene in which a greenhorn youth in the open sky is suddenly touched by the “divine word” of creative understanding of that which only moments ago seemed to him dull routine and soulless professional training.

But this scene is not the most astonishing moment in the film.

⁷⁰ In the original manuscript the sentence ends without giving the name of the actor, which Eisenstein evidently could not remember offhand in the heat of writing.

How strange that in this film full of dizzying tricks and unbelievable situations – from the finest lyricism to the most laughable buffoonery, from characters’ heroism to set pieces of bombing raids on supply depots – the strongest scene is a monologue.

Lionel Barrymore’s monologue.

It is preceded by the following, in short:

The downed pilot Joe has a fiancée.

She is also a pilot.

And stationed at the very same air force base.

Tracy is unusually zealous in his patronage.

Like a scrupulous and compassionate guardian angel, he follows the young pilot everywhere.

Including, for example, to a dance-hall.

Bob⁷¹ is shy. Hesitant.

He’s afraid to approach the girls.

And just as instructively as before, the very same invisible Tracy whispers the same sort of wise suggestions, instilling in his protegee roguishness and self-confidence.

And what does the protegee do?

Out of all the possible young ladies he chooses...Tracy’s fiancée, in her grief and mourning sitting somewhere off to the side.

They don’t dance yet that evening.

But the simple provincial⁷² boy gradually wins her affections.

Tracy is amused at first.

Then angry.

And finally he goes into a rage of impotent jealousy.

And Tracy comes up with an “infernal” plan.

A daredevil in life, he often ended up in detention for his baffling stunts.

His earthly HQ’s chief of staff was a fierce opponent of “aerial hooliganism.”

What does Tracy do?

On the eve of Bob’s day off – which he had planned to spend on a picnic with Joe’s former fiancée – he provokes his “pupil” to a wildly daring stunt – he makes him fly through a barn.⁷³

That evening at HQ, Tracy rubs his hands in malicious glee when Bob is summoned to the general.

However, the cunning Tracy’s scheme is a total fiasco.

⁷¹ The character’s name is actually Ted.

⁷² Eisenstein miscasts the character – Ted Randall is described as a wealthy college graduate from Boston – but correctly identifies Van Johnson’s “typical” casting assignment. Johnson in fact played a “simple provincial boy” serving in WWII in *The Human Comedy*, which Eisenstein apparently watched about a month before *A Guy Named Joe*.

⁷³ They don’t actually fly through a barn in the film, rather they perform a variety of “barnstorming” stunts like loops and rolls. Perhaps knowledge of the English term contributed to Eisenstein’s misrecollection.

Bob comes out the victor.

And what's worse – he goes off with Joe's fiancée!

But it gets worse from there!

Tracy wants to tag along with them, so he can make another maneuver to impede their romance.

But all of a sudden Spencer Tracy's friend appears "from the sky": Spencer Tracy – the pilot Joe – is summoned to the general.

Not to the "earthly" HQ, but the "heavenly" one.

And at the "heavenly" HQ the general (Lionel Barrymore) gives Tracy a drubbing like nothing he'd ever gotten on earth!

And here that drubbing turns into a remarkable monologue about how Tracy has failed to understand his role.

His role – it's in the continuation of that uninterrupted connection between all generations of fallen aviators, which connects the living and the outlived with each other.

The fall of one is a guarantee that another may fly.

Sacrifices are not in vain.

And at the back of every youth who rushes towards the sky there stand generations who have died so that he can do that.

The chain of transferred experience is unbroken.

And in every aerial feat of an individual there is the collective creative achievement of all.

The grandeur of the very idea and the form in which it's delivered is so beautiful that if I was twenty I would probably have rushed for the skies then and there.

One must credit the splendor of the agitational artistry of this film.

In the film's finale (after many twists and turns), Tracy – once again in the instructor's seat – flies into action alongside his fiancée. She bombs the Japanese supply depot and saves Bob [from having to fulfill this dangerous mission originally assigned to him].

And when she returns to camp, she leaps into Bob's embrace and Tracy slowly walks away.

And...disappears.

His mission is fulfilled.

Of course I didn't end up becoming a pilot.

I'm not twenty years old!

But the story of *A Guy Named Joe*, as this film is called, is beautiful in exactly this conception of the creative continuum of generations – in whatever sphere we might consider.

And in our creative sphere no less than others.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Sergei Eizenshein, "Iudif," in Sergei Yutkevich, ed. *Izbrannye proizvedenie* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1968), Vol. 5, 364-96: 383-6.



Fig. 11: Deceptively prosaic-looking Spencer Tracy and freckled Van Johnson.

The first passage – in the memoir chapter “Inversions” – contains a bitter reflection on the state of American-Soviet relations in 1946. The hope for future collaboration between the two nations’ film industries, so exuberantly expressed in Eisenstein’s 1942 film conference speech⁷⁵, had been utterly dashed by the break-up of the Allies and start of the new Cold War. The leadership of both US and USSR descended into paranoid reaction, and the film industries were rent by purges. Witchfinders on either side hunted those who bore the taint of having gotten too close to the enemy during the brief flash of friendship, those whose visions of human freedom were too wide for the tightening borders of the dis-united nations.

Eisenstein’s writings from this last, difficult period of his life are suffused with feverish inspiration and a search for the creative connections which demonstrate the existence of a deep, primordial unity in human striving despite the reigning discord and strife of the post-war world. Despair and optimism, resignation and defiance, each containing the trace of the other, like the Daoist Yin and Yang he so frequently invoked in *Non-Indifferent Nature*. The most enduring hope that Eisenstein develops in this period shines through in his discussions of *A Man Called Joe*: that everything he was trying to accomplish in his short, contentious

⁷⁵ The next line in the speech after the sentence used as an epigraph for this article was “The united post-war cooperation between the Soviet, American, and British film industries will open unimaginable horizons of creative ascension and growth for the film art of the future.”

life would be carried forward in the work of others yet to come. Even when he came to express doubt about the realization of worldwide revolutionary freedom, he continued to venerate the creative continuum through which his works would provide the lift to future artists' wings.

About the Author:

Dr. Maya Garcia is an interdisciplinarian with a passion for archival research, intercultural mediation, and creative experimentation. They received a PhD in Slavic Languages and Literatures with a secondary citation in Music from Harvard University in 2023 and a BA in Slavic Languages and Literatures and Comparative Literature from UC Berkeley in 2014. For their doctoral dissertation, "The Queer Legacy of Ivan the Terrible," Garcia received support from grants including a Fulbright-IIE student research fellowship and spent extensive time in Russian archives tracing the creation and censorship of historical fiction works depicting the contested sexuality of the first Russian tsar. Since returning to the US in 2022, Garcia has published work in *Opera*, *The Digital Review*, *The Cambridge Opera Journal*, and *The Journal of Russian American Studies*. Their post-doctoral research interests include Soviet-American film exchanges during World War II and Eisenstein's reception of Hollywood films.