

# Review

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## At last, the Soviet superstar!

- Ian Christie

Oksana Bulgakowa, *Sergei Eisenstein: A Biography*, translated from the German by Anne Dwyer, Potemkin Press, 1998. ISBN: 3-9804989-8-0

Sergei Eisenstein was fascinated by his own fame. He relished the first *American Film Index* of 1941, which recorded him as the fourth most discussed figure in cinema, after Chaplin, Griffith and Mary Pickford. A result of this fascination was the extraordinary concern he devoted to self-presentation and his posthumous reputation. Indeed a major theme of the memoirs he began to write while recovering from a heart attack in 1946 was his boundless appetite for fame and adulation. He toys with Byron's diary entry '... and he woke up the next morning famous,' claiming that he was still 'unable to read calmly about the one unique moment in other people's lives' that ends with these magic words, before adding immodestly that while this was once due to 'day-dreaming and envy', it was now merely the indulgence of reminiscing.<sup>1</sup> Later, he admits that much of his vast output of writing about cinema over twenty years 'has essentially been about myself'. Even when trying to write about his work 'with detachment', it 'always ends up about yourself, from within – unduly personal, too detailed, intimate, and most often ... triumphant!'<sup>2</sup>

Apart from occasionally castigating himself for such immodesty, one of Eisenstein's solutions for dealing with his own self-fascination was to create a series of personae, ranging from the 'Little Boy from Riga', whom he compared with Dickens' David Copperfield, to the sage professor and polymath advertised in his many grandiose projects for books. More intimate, not to say scandalous, personae were explored in his many drawings, often of an almost unbelievable erotic and irreligious candour.<sup>3</sup> The resulting problem

for any biographer, or even critic, is the near-impossibility of discussing 'Eisenstein' in non-Eisensteinian terms, so completely and seductively did he annotate his life and work. The final chapter of the latest English edition of his memoirs even presents the author in the guise of an 'impartial researcher' of his own oeuvre, discovering that it is 'constantly fixated with one idea', namely the 'attainment of unity'.<sup>4</sup>

Faced with such a pre-emptive strategy, much hope for new perspectives on Eisenstein has rested with the diaries and correspondence that remained inaccessible during the Soviet era. Oksana Bulgakowa is the first biographer to have had access to such material and has made excellent use of it to write a new life which often corrects and occasionally challenges its subject's own account.<sup>5</sup> Not that Bulgakowa has any truly sensational revelations to report: the main contours of Eisenstein's life are confirmed, as is its consensus interpretation. But by using contemporary rather than retrospective documentation this new account of the familiar 'bildungsroman' succeeds in undermining Eisenstein's most insidious authorial traits. Instead of the sense of purpose that he managed to convey, sometimes seeming almost like destiny, Bulgakowa restores a real sense of contingency and improvisation. We learn, for instance, that his decision in late 1920 to abandon studying Japanese at the General Staff Academy in favour of working professionally in the Moscow Proletkult theatre was, in effect, made for him when the Academy discovered that he was ineligible to continue the course. We also learn that this had serious material consequences, since he had been living off an Academy stipend and depending on the rations of food and fuel it provided at this time of extreme privation in post-revolutionary Moscow.

One of Bulgakowa's main aims is less to demythologise the figure so elaborately constructed by its subject than to make visible the scaffolding of material life which supported



• 'The old man': portrait of Eisenstein, probably from the late 1930s.

'Eisenstein'. Money is never mentioned in Eisenstein's own memoirs, except in such myth-making contexts as his \$3000 per week contract with Paramount; but Bulgakowa restores this dimension, showing how his mother was at first able to support him, before his later career brought rich rewards in terms of salaries, prizes and lucrative advisory contracts with Soviet studios. Among Moscow's highly competitive cultural elite in the late 1930s, Eisenstein not only had to modernise his image, culminating in his much-mocked public partnership with Elisaveta Telesheva, but had to earn enough to support this lavish life-style. Once his prestige was restored by the success of *Alexander Nevsky*, after the debacle of *Bezhin Meadow*, Eisenstein was free to indulge his insatiable appetite for books, to which Bulgakowa adds an unexpected late taste for interior decoration.

The main challenge facing any Eisenstein biographer must be how to integrate the relatively sparse external narrative of his life, punctuated only by two trips abroad, with the teeming, hyperactive inner world of his theorising and scholarship. One important contribution by Bulgakowa to understanding the early Eisenstein is her claim that he was in fact deeply involved with a Rosicrucian group in Minsk in 1920. Strictly speaking, this was already deducible, since it is covered at length in a chapter of the memoirs, entitled ironically 'Le bon dieu' ('For some reason I conversed with God in the French style . . .').<sup>6</sup> However, while Eisenstein here narrates his encounter with the Rosicrucian 'bishop' Boris Zubakin with wry scepticism – 'my ebullient enthusiasm was of course ironic' – and implies that once initiated as a 'knight errant', he tried to distance himself from the Rosicrucians and Theosophists, Bulgakowa cites a contemporary letter to his mother which suggests he was deeply smitten. Moreover, she reveals that it was through his Masonic friendships of this period that he was able to enter professional theatre practice in Moscow so rapidly, in spite of his near-total lack of training or experience. Most of his companions in such occult circles of this period would later be arrested and killed, so Eisenstein's

ironic presentation in 1946, even if not intended for publication, was understandable. But what emerges from this episode in Bulgakowa's account is a recurrent pattern of infatuation allied to a shrewd opportunism which would fuel, and prolong, his career. Even at the harrowing end of the *Bezhin Meadow* affair, after the film was already halted, reworked and finally banned, she is able to deduce from Eisenstein's diary that this came as a relief, allowing him time to 'look at my own handwriting' and return to his scholarly reading.<sup>7</sup>

In what is a much shorter book than the two previous English-language biographies, Bulgakowa manages to include a remarkably cogent account of the development of Eisenstein's theoretical position. This is, however, necessarily abbreviated, to the point where summaries of the 'spherical book' project of 1929, of 'Montage' in the 30s, and of the final 'Method' project which occupied his last decade, are so condensed as to be almost cryptic. The sense in which these differ, yet also pursue what Eisenstein always insisted was a 'common goal', has in fact been more lucidly explained by Bulgakowa in her contribution to a centenary collection, *Eisenstein at 100*.<sup>8</sup> There, she is able to show how Eisenstein's failure (or perhaps inability) to carry through any of these exceptionally ambitious theoretical projects has left the fragments that we know as individual essays and posthumously published texts open to very different readings – which can all be justified, depending on which context of interpretation is brought to bear. The sheer eclecticism of Eisenstein's influences – a closer early relationship with Kazimir Malevich than generally realized; the *coup de foudre* of Joyce showing him his structure plan for *Ulysses*; the wide-ranging metapsychological foundations of his later aesthetics – makes any attempt to summarize his position either tend either to glibness or to dizzying abstraction. As an outstanding film and art historian in her own right, Bulgakowa understands better than any previous biographer the climate in which Eisenstein developed his lonely autodidacticism, and also how his intellectual interests interacted



• Self-portrait, apparently dated 1920, when Eisenstein was studying Japanese

with production projects which were all, effectively, commissions. To a great extent, he had to find his own themes 'within' such set tasks as *October*, *Nevsky*, the Bolshoi production of *Die Walküre* and *Ivan*; and for all his wide historical research, he was always ready to set aside fidelity to the known historical record – scandalously so, for many contemporaries, in the case of *Ivan* – in order to pursue a personal interpretation.

Taken together with other recent Eisenstein studies by Yuri Tsivian and Joan Neuberger, both also informed by new archival research, Bulgakowa makes a strong case for taking Eisenstein's synthesis of theory and practice seriously.<sup>9</sup> By setting her narrative authoritatively in the politico-cultural climate of high Stalinism, which was the nightmare period that Eisenstein lived through, she demonstrates as never before the strange mixture of coercion and indulgence that characterised the lives of Russian artists during this era. Eisenstein was consistently

fortunate in his patrons, from the freemasons of Minsk and Moscow, to Stalin himself, craving cultural exculpation in a portrayal of Tsar Ivan's terror. Like the Symbolists of the generation that nourished his childhood passion for art, Eisenstein's final years were spent laying new foundations for a return to an older understanding of art. Although his public writings of 1947 have often been dismissed as merely cynical (by Bergan, most recently<sup>10</sup>), Bulgakowa counterpoints Eisenstein's appointment as director of a cinema section in the prestigious new Institute of Art History in June with his intensive work on *Nonindifferent Nature*, the only major treatise on aesthetics he actually came close to completing. Her summary of the thrust of this still-neglected work underlines (although she does not draw this conclusion) how close Eisenstein's interests in Hegel, in William James' philosophy of religion and in mythological thinking brought him to the Symbolist tradition of Vladimir Solovyov and Vyacheslav Ivanov. Amid the vicious murders of Stalin's 'anti-cosmopolitan' purge, there was every reason to seek refuge in art; but this should not lead us to underestimate either Eisenstein's sincerity or the continued relevance of his later aesthetic.<sup>11</sup>

Compared with the elaborately personal view of Seton, which remains of undoubted historical value, Bulgakowa's approach is brisk, packed with detail and notably lacking excursions into local colour. Her short, staccato sentences recall, if anything, the terse style of Viktor Shklovsky, himself a distinguished earlier biographer of Eisenstein.<sup>12</sup> The translation from a German original is functional rather than elegant, with some minor unaccountable lapses in comprehension. But the book's very economy, its delight in demystification (rather than debunking), and above all its concern to show how the resolutely unpolitical Eisenstein survived the political maelstrom that was Stalin's court make it at once exhilarating and indispensable.

## Notes

- 1 This and subsequent quotations are from William Powell's translation of Eisenstein's memoirs, *Beyond*

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*the Stars*, edited by Richard Taylor (British Film Institute/Seagull Books, 1995), p. 143. Byron wrote after the publication of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*.

- 2 *Beyond the Stars*, p. 423.
- 3 For a selection of the drawings in reproduction, see David Elliott and Ian Christie, eds, *Eisenstein at 90* (Oxford Museum of Modern Art, 1988); S. M. Eisenstein: *Dessins Secrets* (Seuil, 1999); and for critical discussion, see the symposium, 'The Body of the Line: Eisenstein's drawings', *Drawings Papers*, 4, The Drawing Center, New York, 2000.
- 4 The textual history of Eisenstein's memoirs is complex. Most of the material was written intensively in mid-1946, during his convalescence after a heart attack, but other chapters and fragments appear to have been intended for inclusion. Moreover, since Eisenstein never envisaged that these 'immoral memoirs' would be publishable in the Soviet Union, he left no definitive ordering of material at his death in 1950. For a discussion of publication and editing decisions, see Naum Kleiman's Foreword to *Beyond the Stars*.
- 5 The earlier biographies were Marie Seton, *Sergei M Eisenstein* (Grove Press, 1960), and Ronald Bergan, *Eisenstein: A Life in Conflict* (Little Brown, 1997). While Seton remains indispensable, not least because the author knew Eisenstein and remained in contact with him, much of its intimate material and interpretation is unverifiable. Bergan's account, though diligent in drawing on available expertise, sheds little new light on the familiar narrative.
- 6 *Beyond the Stars*, pp. 73-83.
- 7 *Sergei Eisenstein: A Biography*, p. 189.
- 8 Oksana Bulgakowa, 'The Evolving Eisenstein', in Al LaValley and Parry P. Scherr, eds, *Eisenstein at 100: A Reconsideration* (Rutgers University Press, 2001), pp. 38-51.
- 9 Yuri Tsivian, *Ivan the Terrible* (British Film Institute, 2002); Joan Neuberger, *Ivan the Terrible: the Film Companion* (I. B. Tauris, 2003).
- 10 *Eisenstein: A Life in Conflict*, p. 349.
- 11 Tsivian's acute and highly original study of *Ivan the Terrible* uses Eisenstein's 'operational aesthetic' to explicate how this film actually works on us as viewers, in terms of triggering empathy – which points beyond the somewhat sterile comparison of 'early' and 'late' Eisenstein that has long been characteristic of Western criticism (*Ivan the Terrible*, p. 77ff.)
- 12 Shklovsky was a friend, as well as an occasional critic of Eisenstein. Bulgakowa records that when approached to write the script for *Ivan the Terrible*, he suggested Eisenstein should write his own. Shklovsky's *Eisenstein* appeared in Russia in 1973, helping to revive Eisenstein's reputation in the USSR, and was published in German in 1977 (Rowohl), but has not been translated into English.