The Filmmaker in Wartime: Sergei Eisenstein Inside and Out

Joan Neuberger

In January 1941, Sergei Eisenstein had a decision to make. Three years had passed since he had completed a film, his most recent pitch had been shot down, and now Andrei Zhdanov was calling to say that Iosif Stalin wanted him to make a film about the Russian tsar, Ivan the Terrible. This would not be the first work of art that Stalin commissioned about the notorious sixteenth-century ruler, but it was a tricky subject because Ivan, like Stalin, was infamous for unleashing a chaotic campaign of violence against the people he ruled. For much of that year Eisenstein wavered about how to depict the bloody tyrant. He was unhappy with himself for his previous film, *Alexander Nevsky*, a simplistic patriotic portrait, but he was not sure how far or in what ways he was prepared to venture away from political conformity. In April 1941, when he was writing the screenplay, he confided his fears to his diary. Tempted to take the safe path and write a conventional script, he was also tempted to challenge convention and political orthodoxy both: "the guilt of not sticking one's neck out."[1] The Nazi invasion in June 1941 temporarily distracted Eisenstein from work on what would become his ultimate masterpiece, *Ivan the Terrible,* but by the time he was evacuated to Alma Ata (now Almaty) in October, Eisenstein was committed to sticking his neck out and making the experimental, transgressive, unorthodox film that he made. What changed?

Ivan the Terrible is, among other things, a profound exploration of the conflict between the ruler's public responsibility and private, inner life, as well as the consequences of that conflict. It turns out that we can trace Eisenstein's own thinking during that transformative year, through his engagement with the Soviet discourse of public and private, as that discourse was itself pressed in new directions under the pressures of war.

Conceptions of public and private, of individual and collective, and of the interior and exterior have been extensively studied by scholars interested in Soviet subjectivity, but they were also topics of ongoing debate throughout the Soviet period.[2] Leading political and cultural figures in the early Soviet period expected the appearance of a new Marxist, revolutionary subjectivity shaped by the economic, social, and political structures that the revolution

1. Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv literatury i iskusstvo (RGALI), fond 1923 (Eisenstein's personal papers), opis′ 2, delo 1165, list 4 (April 4, 1941).

2. There is now a large literature on Soviet subjectivity and the new Soviet Man and Woman, including Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (Oxford, 1991); Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Culture Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia Revolution* (Ithaca, 1992), and *Tear Off the Masks: Identity and Imposture in Twentieth-Century Russia* (Princeton, 2005); Joachim Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary Under Stalin* (Cambridge, Mass., 2006); Igal Halfin, *Intimate Enemies: Demonizing the Bolshevik Opposition, 1918–1928* (Pittsburgh, 2007); *Soviet Culture and Power: A History in Documents*, eds. Katerina Clark and Evgeny Dobrenko (New Haven, 2007).

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had brought into being. The process of developing revolutionary subjectivity, however, turned out to be fraught and contested. Prerevolutionary and alternative forms of consciousness were unsurprisingly durable and the many formal and dynamic relationships between interior and exterior were complex and unpredictable. Understanding and evaluating the relative weight of individualism as a component of revolutionary collectivism, which had a significant impact on the ways public and private space was configured, was also tricky and changed over time. Even within the politically-constricted public discourse in the 1920s and 30s, therefore, scholars, artists, and political figures carried out extensive debate over the psychological, physiological, cultural, and artistic characteristics and functions of interiority, individuality, and subjectivity in relation to the emerging all-important collective.[3] But at the same time, as structures of power evolved under Stalin in the 1930s to stigmatize (but not entirely eradicate) certain kinds of individuality and privacy and to elevate others such as the Stalin Cult, or stakhanovites and other heroes, these examinations of subjectivity, interiority, and individual agency took on increasingly high-stakes political consequences.[4]

Paradoxically, while it is clear that conceptions of public and private spheres are unevenly shaped by entanglements with other ideologically freighted binaries, such as the individual and the collective, we remain attached to the concept of public and private as separate spheres. The tenacity of this binary has much in common with historical literature on public and private life that was precipitated by Jurgen Habermas in *The Structural Transformations of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (1991) and took off among historians with the publication of the massive collection edited by Philippe Ariès and Georges Duby, *Historie de la vie privée*.[5] But as Dena Goodman argued about Old Regime France, "we need to get away from rigidly oppositional thinking that assumes two spheres or

3. Emma Widdis, *Socialist Senses: Film, Feeling, and the Soviet Subject, 1917–1940* (Bloomington, 1917); Mark Steinberg and Valeria Sobol, eds., *Interpreting Emotions in Russian and Eastern Europe* (Dekalb, IL, 2011); Thomas Lahusen, *How Life Writes the Book: Real Socialism and Socialist Realism in Stalin's Russia* (Ithaca, 1997); Lewis H. Seigelbaum, ed., *Borders of Socialism: Private Spheres of Soviet Russia* (New York, 2006); David Crowley and Susan Emily Reid, eds., *Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc* (New York, 2002); Svetland Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Cambridge, Mass., 1994); Ilya Utekhin, *Ocherki kommunal'nogo byta* (Moscow, 2001); Mikhail Ryklin, *Prostranstva likovaniia: Totalitarizm i razlichie* (Moscow, 2002); Abbott Gleason, *Totalitarianism: The Inner History of the Cold War* (New York, 1995); Raymond Bauer, *The New Man in Soviet Psychology* (Cambridge, Mass., 1952), Oleg Kharkhordin, *The Collective and the Individual in Russia* (Berkeley, 1999).

4. Lilya Kaganovsky, *How the Soviet Man was Unmade: Cultural Fantasy and Male Subjectivity under Stalin* (Pittsburgh, 2008); Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as Civilization* (Berkeley, 1996); Jan Plamper, *The Stalin Cult: A Study in the Alchemy of Power* (Stanford, 2012); Lewis Siegelbaum, *Stakhanovism and the Politics of Productivity in the USSR, 1935–1941* (Cambridge, Eng., 1988); Anna Krylova, "Imagining Socialism in the Soviet Century," *Social History* 42, no. 3 (August 2017): 315–41; Anatoly Pinsky, "The Origins of Post-Stalin Individuality: Aleksandr Tvardovskii and the Evolution of 1930s Soviet Romanticism," *Russian Review* 76, no. 3 (July 2017): 458–83.

5. Philippe Ariès and Georges Duby, eds., *Histoire de la vie privée*, 5 vols. (Paris, 1985–89).

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two discourses, one public and the other private."[6] Susan Gal offers a model for a more complex understanding of the public/private dichotomy based on the mathematical concept of the fractal.[7] She sees the boundary separating the public from the private as not only porous, but as porous in a special, infinitely replicating way. Accordingly, we may see the living room and the street as entirely different spheres, but within the private living room we replicate the dual possibilities for performing as public and private entities, as individuals and as members of collectives. In the public sphere we do the same thing, acting out our dual individual and collective identities at work and play.[8] The infinitely replicating binary fractal brings us back to Eisenstein, whose dialectical understanding of consciousness, cognition, and the production and reception of art was similarly fractal. As Luka Arsenjuk has argued, Eisenstein's dialectic is never a simple binary confrontation of opposites, but always includes a kind of infinite replication of confrontations within each dialectical entity.[9] In Moscow at the beginning of the war, Eisenstein saw the breakdown of established boundaries and categories as a city full of such fractal dialectics.

Throughout his career, Eisenstein was preoccupied with many varied forms of the relationship between interiority and exteriority, individual and collective, and the ways we obliterate the lines that only seem to divide these binaries, through transformative, dialectical synthesis, or *ekstasis*. He was acutely attuned to the demands of public performativity. In his memoirs, he described himself as both an overly well-behaved little boy and a non-compliant rebel who overthrew his many biological, artistic, and political fathers; as a compliant public actor and a defiantly revolutionary artist. In more abstract terms, throughout his writing, he analyzed the tension between such interiorities as feeling, sensation, and consciousness on the one hand, and exteriorities, such as form, gesture, and movement, on the other. Eisenstein was especially interested in understanding the precise mechanisms that made it possible for things outside ourselves—from formal elements in works of art to the entirety of the natural world—to appeal to our feelings and register inside us, in our minds and bodies, as new ideas and feelings. He called this his "pathological passion for questions regarding the mutability of form."[10] Here he is talking about his understanding of art as process of connection and communication between artist and audience (an individual and a collective), that involves the transmutation of something interior (the author's ideas

6. Dena Goodman, "Public Sphere and Private Life: Toward a Synthesis of Current Historiographical Approaches to the Old Regime," *History and Theory* 31, no. 1 (February 1992): 14.

7. Susan Gal, "A Semiotics of the Public/Private Distinction," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 13, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 77–98.

8. Gal, "A Semiotics of the Public/Private Distinction," 80–84. See also Katerina Gerasimov, "Public Privacy in the Soviet Communal Apartment," in David Crowley and Susan Emily Reid, eds., *Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc* (Oxford, Eng., 2002).

9. Luka Arsenjuk, *Movement, Action, Image, Montage: Sergei Eisenstein and the Cinema in Crisis* (Minneapolis, 2018)

10. S. M. Eisenstein, *Selected Works*: *Beyond the Stars, The Memoirs of Sergei Eisenstein*, ed. Richard Taylor, trans. William Powell (London, 1995), 429 (translation corrected).

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and feelings) into something exterior (film form, filmed images on screen), and into something interior again (the spectator's ideas, sensations, and emotions). In practice, especially in *Ivan the Terrible*, he sought to join these questions of subjectivity and the feeling-sensate, thinking spectator to questions of power and politics. This is the context in which Eisenstein explored conflicts between public and private responsibility, the impact of inner conflict on the external world, and the political valences of authenticity and performativity as components of power in *Ivan the Terrible*.

A long entry in Eisenstein's diary, written during the opening stages of the Nazi invasion in the summer of 1941, shows us Eisenstein's thinking about public and private, interior and exterior, and power and agency at this particularly critical stage in his life and work. The passage documents Eisenstein's recognition of the intellectual and emotional transformations brought on by the war, and by the war's dismantling of social and psychological boundaries. The breakdown of walls, both literal and metaphorical, exposed pre-existing but perhaps unacknowledged dialectical tensions between interior and exterior that, when breached, produced synthetic *ekstasis*, or a transcendent, out-of-body experience that led to structural, social, and personal transformations. The visionary transformation Eisenstein experienced during the bombing raids in July and August 1941 offers key interventions in debates about the possibilities for conceptualizing and practicing individuality and collectivity and the fractal replication of porous boundaries of public and private in the Stalinist era. What did it mean to be an individual in Stalinist society? What did it mean to be a socialist individual in Stalinist society? What does it mean to be an important individual in a collectivist society? What was the nature and significance of collectivity itself? And what impact did the war have on all these notions of self and society? This text, unpublished and unintended for publication, gives us a voice and a spectrum of positions that we have not heard before on the possibilities for public and private life, inside and out, in the early Soviet Union.

Eisenstein kept diaries his entire adult life. They are important documents, but not because they expose the everyday life or the hidden secrets of this prominent Soviet cultural figure. Eisenstein's diaries rarely disclose personal details, especially after the late 1930s, but they are revealing nonetheless. Structured like a kind of fragmented interior monologue, their pages contain sketches, notes on reading, ruminations on theory, art, and filmmaking, occasional cryptic notes about meetings or events, and, occasionally, personal reflections. Written primarily in Russian, Eisenstein often switched to English, German, and French, and used the other languages in relatively consistent, and culturally conventionalized, ways: German for philosophy and psychology, French for the occasional romance and sex, and English for secrets and the very rare political comment. Politics and history are not absent from his diaries, but they are less self-consciously historical than Irina Paperno sees in the post-war diaries she studies. The unusual reflectivity and self-examination in Eisenstein's entries at the beginning of the war have more in common with the diaries from the siege of Leningrad that Alexis Peri discovered. In far less traumatic conditions, Eisenstein's war experience compelled him to

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record his reflections on his pre-war life and his observations about the way the war transformed individual and collective identity, public and private, inside and out.[11] The writing is often inquisitive and intellectually unguarded and, despite the scarcity of explicit confessions or political observations, the diaries allow us to see Eisenstein's original and eccentric ways of thinking.

Eisenstein's diary challenges many of the assumptions that have become common wisdom on Soviet subjectivity. His individualism and his understanding of the collective are, at times, strikingly familiar, even banal, to my western eye. His writing style and the subject matter in his private writing are far more open about things he treated cautiously or in code or not at all in public. He makes that split between public and private explicit in a note introducing one of his rare confessional passages, written in English in September 1941. Eisenstein was so cautious about revealing himself in public that he felt the need to conceal his thoughts about himself in what he imagined was a little known language even in a diary meant for his eyes alone: "There are so few English reading people in this country here so that I can write what ever I think of myself in—this language."[12] Not surprisingly then, Eisenstein rarely abandoned his natural caution in his diaries. He organized his writing behavior and his sense of self in a language-coded, multi-layered scheme meant to protect his privacy and his feelings from prying eyes. But even Eisenstein's sharply-partitioned private sphere is suffused with his public persona and his awareness of the public *in* private that Gal identifies as the fractal private sphere. In his diary, Eisenstein's voice comes across as quintessentially individualistic, while at the same time, ever aware of himself as a public figure. Eisenstein does not reject public life or the collective or valorize the individual and the private (or vice versa), but rather offers a thoughtful reflection on the nature of the lines that divide individual and collective and public and private and, most importantly, the ways these binaries intersect and merge, or as he liked to put it, "interpenetrate." At the same time, he makes very clear distinctions between what he considered "authentic" and "phony" (*pozerskii*), which were also rooted in that fractal interpenetration of public and private.

In July 1941, Moscow was subject to its first nighttime bombing raids by Nazi warplanes.[13] These were the early months of the war, so there was still food and fuel (though photographs taken in the summer show people collecting firewood for the coming winter). Morale was relatively high but the bombing was unnerving and disruptive. On the first night, four waves of nearly 200 planes attacked the city; 130 people were killed, 241 were seriously injured, and another 421 were wounded; thirty-seven buildings were destroyed. All this was far less damage and loss of life than in the London Blitz the previous year, or in Leningrad in the months to come, but the summer air raids brought

11. Irina Paperno, *Stories of Soviet Experience: Memoirs, Diaries, Dreams* (Ithaca, 2009); Alexis Peri, *The War Within: Diaries from the Siege of Leningrad* (Cambridge, Mass., 2017).

12. RGALI, f. 1923, op. 2, d. 1167, ll. 34–35 (Sept 16, 1941).

13. Iu. Iu. Kammerer, ed., *Moskve—"vozdushnaia trevoga!": Mestnaia PVO v gody voiny*, 2nd ed. (Moscow, 1991); Rodric Braithwaite, *Moscow 1941: A City and Its People at War* (New York, 2006), 167–87.

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real destruction and death to the heart of the capital.[14] As artistic director of the Moscow film studio, Mosfil′m, Eisenstein had been in charge of reorienting film production to support the war effort since the day of the invasion, June 22. That summer, he had to postpone his own work on the script for *Ivan the Terrible*, which Stalin had commissioned just six months earlier. July 24 (a Thursday) must have found him with time on his hands, because he spent the better part of the day driving around the city, along streets littered with glass and rubble, after three successive nights of bombing raids.

The diary entry Eisenstein wrote the next day, on July 25, 1941, shows that the destruction had a deep impact on him. A year later, he would recall that his visual impressions of that day were "so unexpected and rich."[15] Eisenstein was a shrewd observer with almost twenty years experience writing about visual perception, but his diary entry should not be read as an unexamined or spontaneous transcript. Another diary entry (undated and stuck into a different notebook) that appears to be nothing more than a list of unconnected scribbles, turns out to be a rough outline of topics that would find their way into the July 25 entry and shows that that longer entry was the result of some deliberate contemplation.[16] Eisenstein processed and organized his impressions into a thematically coherent piece of writing that placed what he saw in the context of his earlier experiences and his theoretical preoccupations.

Eisenstein began the entry with an arresting image that collapses the discursive space of public and private. Setting out on the Arbat, at that time a fashionable, central Moscow avenue that had suffered two direct hits, and driving past building after building of nothing but broken windows, it occurred to him that the "commonplace" but shallow expression that "the eye is the window into the soul" was less true than what he called "the opposite formula," that "windows are the eyes of the street." Windows don't open an interior world to the gaze of the passerby, they impede access with an impermeable surface that reflects light. If they don't open our private, inner lives, they do provide a public spectacle. Windows "sparkle" and give the street a kind of luster or brilliance.

> They endow the street with life, vision, and a soul. And when they're gone, the most animated, the most luxurious street seems blank or blind. . .. Without glass—and on the Arbat all the glass was blown out—the street suddenly begins to look like a house of cards: a papier-mâché mask with empty slits instead of eyes where we are used to seeing the lively play of windows, large and small, or narrow as if squinting, or the gigantic, wide open windows of shops.17

This is a double transformation. The breakdown of the wall separating the inside from the outside was violent, destructive, and frightening, but also creative, transformative, and revelatory. The assault on the eyes of the street and

14. Braithwaite, *Moscow 1941*, 174–77.

15. RGALI, f. 1923, op. 2, d. 1168, 1. 59 (July 7, 1942).

16. RGALI, f. 1923, op. 2, d. 1170, l. 1.

17. Eisenstein often used ellipses to lend drama or indicate a pause in his writing. I use dashes to represent his ellipses so as not to confuse them with ellipses that indicate words omitted from a quotation. RGALI, f. 1923, op. 2, d. 1166, ll. 1–2 (July 25, 1941).

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the destruction of their walls and windows created new possibilities for sight and new possibilities for connection. The street, indeed the city of Moscow, only revealed itself fully when the sparkling spectacle that separated private and public was destroyed and the resulting linkages were made visible to the eye. The city only acquired the potential for legibility and meaning and the ability to produce something new when it was transformed from a single, all-public mirror image (exterior reflected onto exterior), into a genuinely dialectical one.

For four more dense pages of text, Eisenstein described buildings whose broken windows or ruined walls exposed interiors studded with incongruous juxtapositions that stimulated his dialectical imagination.

> And here is a broken window that looks like a cracked pince-nez. And in place of the pupil, suddenly an extraordinary household lamp appears behind it. A table lamp with a matte, funnel-shaped lampshade on top. Remodeled by kerosene bomb. On a similar bronze base, on one leg. The window was smashed. The light-bulb is gone.18

He saw a damaged, neo-classical bas-relief hanging off the façade of Aleksandr Griboedov's house on Novinskii (Chaikovskii) Boulevard that he thought resembled a Picasso collage. Two "fantastic" chandeliers, "all bent out of shape," were visible through adjacent windows, or what once were windows, near the Vakhtangov Theater, but only because the broken glass allowed passersby to see into "the depths" of the building to the dark halls in the back. There too, "through the tatters of a surviving wall on the side of the shopping arcade—on the wall—Shakespeare with the bottom half of the portrait torn off. Probably from a poster for *Much Ado About Nothing*."[19] The famous Constructivist building that housed the state newspaper, *Izvestiia*, evoked fearful memories of the previous war rather than creative images of artful compositions. "The *Izvestiia* building was nothing but glass. There's no glass left. And the building seems like a big, rusty, iron bookcase. No, it's not even big, and it looks more like a broken electric appliance or a wood-burning stove corroded on one side. Will this be a winter of wood-burning stoves?"[20] The word he uses for wood-burning stove is "*burzhuika*" (bourgeois), an object-image that recalls the Russian revolutionary and Civil War period, when fuel shortages made such *burzhuiki* devour a large proportion of Russians' wooden furniture. Although personally he was never in danger of starvation in the 1920s, Eisenstein is signifying a period of frightening deprivation.

These images are rife with irony and mirror-reversals, typical of the way Eisenstein saw violence as a source of creativity, found humor in serious things, and constructed meaning from visual experience. If, at first, the violent destruction of the façade seems to preoccupy him, it is immediately clear that he took real pleasure in the Shakespeare fragment collage, the "found" Picasso, and the diminished domination of *Izvestiia*, now stripped bare and "broken." In his written report of the day's sights, the destruction of the partition separating the interior from the exterior was no longer (or no

18. RGALI, f. 1923, op. 2, d. 1166, ll. 1–2 (July 25, 1941).
19. RGALI, f. 1923, op. 2, d. 1166, 1. 4 (July 25, 1941).
20. RGALI, f. 1923, op. 2, d. 1166, ll. 3–4 (July 25, 1941). *Izvestiia* was the official state newspaper.

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longer *just*) a tragic assault on the lively face of the city. It was transformed by violence into material for a more playful, inventive, and ultimately more revealing dialectic between interior and exterior. In their absence, the sparkling windows of peacetime were now revealed to have been a barrier dividing the public from the private. When they had been intact, city windows closed off domestic life from official public life, but at the same time offered a presentable, even animated and shining face for the cityscape. But once shattered, the brilliant face of the street turns out to be no more than a mask with empty eye sockets. That "lively" life of the street is itself revealed to have been a façade and an illusion. A typical Eisenstein reversal device: meaning is to be found, not in mere reflection, but in the rupture and the newly-exposed dialectics (that he dubbed "more true"): in the awareness of the invisible behind the visible, in the unresolved tension between the surface and the depth, and what that breach both reveals and conceals.

At first glance, these observations seem to suggest a sharply-bifurcated conception of public and private space: the fortified defense of the private walled off against the all-seeing eye of the state lurking in the bright, shiny face keeping watch on passersby. As Katerina Clark has written, architecture in Stalinist culture functioned in "two orders of reality, sacred and profane. . .. The inside of a given building might be defined largely by its mundane function. . .while outside it functioned as a sacred monument to inspire awe and contemplation."[21] But Eisenstein complicates the single binary by showing how it is infinitely (fractally) reproduced. When bombing destroyed that public/private spatial hierarchy, the windows that seemed to have "life, looks, and a soul," turned out to be no more than a scary carnival mask with unreadable slits for eyes. Refashioned by the enemy's bombs and the artist's vision, the cracked mask revealed glittering eyeless lamps, a remodeled chandelier, a modernist collage, and Shakespeare gazing down at human folly. When these private nightmares and fantasies are exposed to the public eye, they do not simply allow the intrusion of the public into the private, they reveal the ways the Stalinist private produces new binaries that are dialectically creative and terrifying at the same time. Eisenstein was not new to the fractal binary. Here he is, a decade earlier, on the carnival death masks and skeletons he saw on the Day of the Dead when he was filming in Mexico in 1931:

> This is bound to appear as a dynamically spontaneous picture. Not as a figurative description, but as a living image, in which the skull really does come to the surface. The face emerges through the skull. And the face is like a certain image of the skull and the skull like a certain independent face—one living on top of the other. One hidden beneath the other. One living an independent life through the other. One in turn shining through the other. One and the other, repeating the physical schema of the process via the interplay of face and skull, changing masks. Masks![22]

21. Katerina Clark, "Socialist Realism and the Sacralizing of Space," in Eric Naiman and Evgeny Dobrenko, eds., *Landscapes of Stalinism: The Art and Ideology of Soviet Space* (Seattle, 2003), 11.

22. Eisenstein, *Selected Works: Beyond the Stars*, 628; see also Mikhail Iampolsky, "The Essential Bone Structure: Mimesis in Eisenstein," in Ian Christie and Richard Taylor, eds., *Eisenstein Rediscovered* (London, 1993), 187–88.

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The surface always conceals but it never *only* conceals and sometimes the "skull beneath the skin" is also a mask. In Eisenstein, the meaning in the visual experience is to be found, not in hermeneutic uncovering of the concealed but in the dialectical interplay of visible and invisible—and the further, fractal visible/invisible content of both. Neither the surface nor the depth has significance on its own and neither necessarily dominates: only in dialectical opposition are the exterior and interior, public and private, or thinking and feeling capable of producing an idea or of having an impact on the spectator. Only when the wall is broken down and the interplay itself is revealed—"the mutability of form"—is there a chance for transformation or revelation. The glitter of Stalinist public street life was revealed as an illusion. The reconnection of indoors and outdoors made that Stalinist performative illusion visible and palpable and those multiple replicating forms made possible "more true" connections of all kinds.

To this point the diary entry is a mostly playful, intellectual reconstruction of the changes Eisenstein found in Moscow's public face filtered through his understanding of dialectics, his interest in the mutability of form, and what he called the interpenetration of sensory-emotional thinking. His writing shifts emotional registers when he turns his attention from the outside world to the world inside his own building, and from the street to the impact of the bombing on himself: when he turns his attention to the unexpected connections made possible by the destruction of walls, by the new dialectics produced by the shattered barrier dividing the public and private. The tone becomes somber and contemplative as he begins to consider the changes taking place in everyday life in a city under siege. Here Eisenstein framed his thoughts with the new, wartime social reality that broke down walls between people. This division was played out between public and private, and fractally within Eisenstein himself. It is important to remember that alongside the privileges he enjoyed as a leading cultural figure and an artist of exceptional talent, he was also subject to many of the same depredations as everybody else living in the Stalinist police state; he was both an exceptional and a typical member of Soviet society. This dual identity is embodied in Eisenstein's reflections, which include (in dialectical tension) the creative and profound as well as the sentimental and banal.

> Evening. In a few minutes there is sure to be a siren. We'll go to the trenches. Astonishing how life changes. Here, we intellectuals, engineers of souls, world famous names—every evening we crawl on our hands and knees into an earthen pit. Shoulders' width. As deep as the height of your head. You lie on your side in this damp ditch and get a foretaste of your future in a coffin.[23]

If this sounds melodramatic and macabre—and there were also eerie "stooped figures throwing off long shadows" among the trenches and potato plants in the night courtyard—it also turned out to be a surprisingly cozy space for

23. Stalin called artists "engineers of human souls." RGALI, f. 1923, op. 2, d. 1166, ll. 5–6.

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Eisenstein, who found himself dozing off in his dark ersatz grave—which he recorded with some embarrassment.[24] An unexpected "atmosphere of goodwill" prevailed, foreshadowed by the leveling-reversal taking place when world famous artists sheltered in trenches alongside everyone else. Era Savel′eva, a cinematographer who lived in his building, remembered that it was Eisenstein who provided the goodwill and made the time in the dugouts pass imperceptibly for everyone.[25] He noted that people stopped worrying about their personal belongings. Locked doors were left open. Neighbors who never knew each other were thrown together. At night, when everyone was hiding in the trenches in the courtyard, their cats became the "sovereign rulers" of the building, sauntering from apartment to apartment.

Everything about this new wartime regime surprised Eisenstein: the broken down walls and open doors, the commingling of neighbor-strangers, the foretaste of death, and comfort of the grave. The easy camaraderie and sense of a neighborly collective spirit were unexpected and unfamiliar. He never even hints at the similarity between the spontaneous, natural collective of the nighttime courtyard shelters and the performative public ideology of socialist collectivity. Writing about this new environment, Eisenstein sounds like any bourgeois individual when disaster temporarily forces people to depend on one another. In fact, he compares the atmosphere during the bombing to a popular play by a Swedish playwright, Henning Berger, on a similar situation. "The Flood," written in 1908 and directed by Evgenii Vakhtangov in Moscow in 1915, is about people who came together during a disaster and drifted apart when the danger receded.[26] Eisenstein did not sound like a member of a society that valorized collective identity and public commitment and stigmatized private life and individualism (or vice versa). In characterizing the wartime collective, Eisenstein clearly makes a distinction between what he found in his courtyard during the air raids and what was performed in the collectives of Soviet public life. These pleasures of the wartime neighborly collective should not be understood as the binary "false surface/underlying authenticity" but rather as something that emerged from the dialectic tension between the numerous isomorphic binaries: interior/exterior, individual/collective, private/public. In fact, immediately after remarking on the melancholy pleasures of the emergency collective, Eisenstein's desire to assert his individuality came to the surface, but it is a fractal individuality that seeks its significance in a larger social and natural world.[27]

His interior monologue turned to wondering, how both the exceptional "engineers of souls" and their more anonymous neighbors, all lying next to each other in the trenches among the potato plants, can make a mark

24. RGALI, f. 1923, op. 2, d. 1166, l. 14 (August 4, 1941).

25. Esfir′ Tobak, "Moi gigant," *Kinostsenarii* 6 (1997): 133.

26. RGALI, f. 1923, op. 2, d. 1166, 1. 6; my thanks to Katya Cotey for helping me identify the author of the play. It was made into a film in the US in 1922, entitled "The Sin Flood," directed by Frank Lloyd.

27. As Anna Krylova, Anatoly Pinsky, and others have shown, the individual/collective was never a simple or clear-cut dichotomy in public, either.

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on the world? Here Eisenstein starts thinking about Pierre Bezukhov, the protagonist of Lev Tolstoi's *War and Peace,* bumbling around Moscow during the French occupation and the fires of 1812. Disoriented by the battle he had just witnessed, Pierre's instinct is to do something useful. He decides to assassinate Napoleon, a grandiose gesture of individual heroism if ever there was one, but he ends up getting arrested with a motley crowd of other people wandering the streets. Eisenstein experienced the same somewhat confused desire for meaningful action in the same city under siege. He recounted lying outside in the dark for a long time, until 2 am, watching for the Big Dipper, and that produced (or he used it to stage) a personal memory of another night, and another occasion for thinking about making a mark.

> In Chichén Itzá [in 1931], I deliberately sat on the pyramid watching for the Big Dipper to plunge behind the Temple of the Thousand Columns.
>
> Or maybe the other way around.
>
> I sat deliberately. As if making a notch in the sky. To remember on a starry night, those starry nights over Mexico, from any point on the Earth's globe.28

Like Tolstoi's Pierre, Eisenstein's idea of making a mark was through immersing the individual in something much larger, in this case the natural world, rather than singling himself out with a grand public act.

The collective experience of waiting out the wartime bombing raids in the courtyard with his neighbors produced both appreciation for the pleasures of the collective and, dialectically, new thoughts and feelings about individual endeavor. All of this happened suddenly: "The war entered life unexpectedly. Yesterday it wasn't. Today it is. . . .How simple—the same as the bombing. Wasn't. Is. And then again won't be."[29] Just as suddenly he confesses to himself (and not for the first or last time) that he has led too cautious a life. He writes, "If I survive—I must live differently. More intensely. . . . Until now my life has been like those Japanese wooden flowers that unfurl in a basin of water. A coiled life, in wait. In eternal expectation. What for? It's time. . . .War opens your eyes."[30] Amid all the destruction and deprivation, Eisenstein is gratified to find what he calls genuine heroism, and to find it not in grand performative gestures but in the collective activities of mere survival. "Report. Sleep. Eat. Carry your bundle. Get yourself under the acacia branch along the ramshackle fence [in the courtyard]. From the trench, look it in the eyes. This is heroism. Real heroism. Not posturing, but somehow practical."[31]

28. RGALI, f. 1923, op. 2, d. 1166, ll. 8–9.

29. "Bombezhka ne bylo. Est′. I ne budet."–a political pun on the slogan: "Lenin lived, Lenin lives, Lenin will live." Later he puns on Machiavelli (after re-reading *The Prince*): "The trench justifies the means"; the word for means, "tsel′," and for trench or dugout, "shchel′," are nearly identical; RGALI, f. 1923, op. 2, d. 1166, ll. 9–10 (July 25, 1941), and l. 18 (August 10, 1941).

30. RGALI, f. 1923, op. 2, d. 1166, ll. 10–11 (July 25, 1941). Emphasis added.

31. RGALI, f. 1923, op. 2, d. 1166, ll. 11–12 (July 25, 1941).

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Real, everyday heroism and survival under difficult circumstances brought Eisenstein back to where he began, with a collectivism brought on by war's violence and the needs of everyday survival that stripped away the posturing and the various boundaries between people: "Gone is the contradiction between mine and not-mine. Private and public. In this way, those higher in consciousness are indistinguishable from the primitive and originary."[32]

That last oddly out of place characterization of collectivism is in fact a reference to the concept underlying all of Eisenstein's theoretical work during this period. He believed, as he put it in 1935:

> The dialectic of a work of art is based on a curious "dualism." The impact of a work of art is based on the fact that a double process is taking place in it simultaneously: a determined progressive ascent along a path to the highest intellectual level of consciousness and at the same time a penetration through the structure of form into the very deepest strata of sensory-emotional thinking. The polar development of these two tendencies creates that remarkable tension in the unity of form and content that distinguishes the genuine work of art.33

The collectivism he found in his courtyard waiting for bombs to fall came about not only because social and physical walls were eradicated but because lines between instinctive feeling and rational thinking were also erased. Everything Eisenstein wrote from at least 1935 until his death in 1948 was connected with his attempt to understand this particular dialectic. He was not the first person to be interested in the interplay of emotions, cognition, and the visceral in art and life in the 1930s, but he was the first to put the three together and study the ways great works of art—from multiple media and genres and from all over the world: Mexico, Japan, China, Greece, Africa, the Arctic, the South Pacific—share this ability to stimulate a dialectic of sensory-feeling on the one hand and rational intellection on the other. He believed that art is not only something that stimulates our thinking as rational, civilized, culturally-literate people, but that at the same time it triggers our feelings and our senses; both our emotions and our physical sensations. We do not just look at art; we feel what we see and hear in our bodies and with our emotions, as well as with our thinking. Art sends us into a magical state of openness, of wordless, instinctive, primal, sensory-emotional experience. He was particularly interested in the sensory-emotional side of this equation and he came to associate that intuitive, trance-like state of pure feeling with things that came *before*; before modern civilization with its valorization of reason, order, and perspective, but also *before* birth as individuals and *before* evolution as societies, both cultural and biological. He associated the modern sensory-emotional response to art with the state we experience in our watery, pre-logical, pre-natal life in the womb, in the explosive, liberating, transcendent,

32. RGALI, f. 1923, op. 2, d. 1166, 1. 13 (July 25, 1941). Mikhail Ryklin writes in *Spaces of Jubilation* that public performativity was disastrous for the peoples involved: "world-historical posturing (*pozerstvo*), the centers of which were Moscow and Berlin, cost both peoples [Russians and Germans] dearly," 261.

33. Sergei Eizenshtein, *Izbrannye proizvedeniia v shestsi tomakh*, 6 vols. (Moscow, 1964–71), 2:120–21.

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transformative experience of *ekstasis* that occurred in the moment of a dialectical synthetic resolution, and in the specific structures of cultural and ritual activities of so-called "primitive" peoples, based on the writing of early ethnographers James Frazer and especially Lucién Levy-Bruhl.

There is plenty to criticize in Eisenstein's modernist Eurocentric view of originary peoples, but it is important to note that he distinguished himself from Frazer and Levi-Bruhl in that he did not see primitive cultures as inferior or deficient in some way. Nor did he look at them with nostalgia as an alternative to modern industrial society. On the contrary, he believed that modern people share the qualities that were attributed to "primitive" societies, the kinds of magical, anti-rational thinking and feeling that was associated with the distant, and mostly non-European, past. We animate inanimate objects, we endow material things with agency, we think of ourselves as able to become animals and other creatures, beliefs that we enact in our life-cycle rituals or at times of great stress or transformation. Our ability to imagine what Jane Bennett calls "vibrant matter" or to grant human-like agency to objects as W.J. T. Mitchell did when he asked "what do pictures want," is what Eisenstein meant by our essential desire for "undifferentiatedness."[34] Those desires for logical and pre-logical ("primitive and originary"), and for their post-dialectical synthetic *ekstasis* allow us to blast through the walls that separate us from each other the way bombs obliterated shiny windows on Moscow streets and social barriers in Moscow's shelters and courtyards. Eisenstein saw the neighborly, wartime collective as "indistinguishable" from a collective that he fully believed in, that of both modern and originary peoples who could transfigure into animals or attain the sensory-emotional feeling of sexual *ekstasis* or in pre-natal, sexual undifferentiation in our origins as cells.

This iteration of Eisenstein's "mutability of form" is fundamental to both his understanding of human experience and to the practice of film watching. The movement of ideas and feelings from author to screen to viewer can operate because Eisenstein conceptualized the barrier dividing them not as a wall but as what Anne Eakin Moss calls "the permeable screen."[35] Eisenstein was not entirely consistent about how this communication was supposed to happen but throughout these discussions, since at least 1929, Eisenstein saw film form as the embodiment of the artist's ideas and feelings, and film as an instrument of communication that connects artist and audience on a direct primal, visceral, "sensory-emotional," as well as intellectual levels.[36] I took this detour into theory because the same dynamic that Eisenstein saw in the production and reception of film (and all art) is the model for the dialectic of interior and exterior brought on by the shattered windows and broken

34. Eisenstein prefigures this literature by exploring the animation of things at great length in his manuscripts and notebooks; see Joan Neuberger, *This Thing of Darkness: Eisenstein's Ivan the Terrible in Stalin's Russia* (Ithaca, 2019), 152–75; Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC, 2010), vii; W. J. T. Mitchell, *What do Pictures Want: The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago, 2005).

35. Anne Eakin Moss, "The Permeable Screen: Soviet Cinema and the Fantasy of No Limits," *Screen* 59, no. 4 (Winter 2018): 420–43.

36. RGALI, f. 1923, op. 2, d. 1165, 1. 5 (April 16, 1941); *Nonindifferent Nature*, 3–4; also 9, 28–29, 36.

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down walls of the bombed out city. The dialectical resolution of the tensions between private and public brought him out of the studio and onto the street, out of his individual apartment into the courtyard with its potato plants, its trenches, its camaraderie, and its everyday individual and collective heroism.

Eisenstein was not alone in thinking that the shattering of walls and the mass danger and destruction of the war opened up possibilities for something he saw as more real, "more true." It was not uncommon for people who lived through the war to later remember its first months with ironic fondness because it brought relief from Stalinist isolation and public doublespeak. The poet Boris Pasternak also recalled, in what can only seem today to be a horrific comparison, that "when the war flared up, its real horrors and real dangers, the threat of a real death, were a blessing compared to the [Stalinist] inhuman reign of fantasy."[37] Eisenstein had no illusions about the dangers of Soviet ideologies of public and private but he was equally well aware of how permeable and reversible the line dividing them was. Having survived repeated political attacks and having outlived some of his persecutors and too many of his friends, he had learned to guard his private life and thoughts, but he understood what public ambition and survival cost him personally and morally.[38] Relief from the pressures of conformist collectivism helped make it possible for him to doze in the bomb shelter, and the political and historical are never far removed from the personal and aesthetic in Eisenstein's work. In this diary entry he is showing us how the visual traces of the bombing of Moscow and the experience of seeing the changed streets with open eyes called up a swarm of associations that organized and concentrated unacknowledged, unarticulated thoughts and feelings that represented the changes caused by the war in personal and political life.

The diary entry of July 25 ends with Eisenstein's appreciation for the interpenetration of the individual and collective in everyday heroism, but he wrote a few post-scripts that expand on the issues he raised and show his mood moving in two new directions. First, in August, he added a few shorter entries to this notebook on the visual transformation of Moscow by the bombing. Most notably, he described government efforts to protect well-known buildings in the city center by painting stripes on them, or by wrapping them in cloth. Artists were employed to paint reflective stripes on the Kremlin walls and the Manege, and the Bolshoi Theater was given a massive plywood façade to make it look more like a Renaissance than a classical structure.[39] He complains about a film theater on Sadovaya called The First Stereoscope, which was disguised with fanciful and futile additions. "An undistinguished gray cube. . .decorated with a plywood façade in a burst of architectural fantasy. It is this kind of gaudy *brio* that *plagues* the streets of Moscow! Fire would strip

37. Richard Stites, ed., *Culture and Entertainment in Wartime Russia* (Bloomington, 1995), 5.

38. Comments on the topic of Eisenstein's moral failings in the face of political pressure can be found in these diary entries and memoirs: RGALI, f. 1923, op. 2, d. 1152, ll. 9, 11; and d. 1167, ll. 34–39; *Beyond the Stars*, 739–42.

39. RGALI, f. 1923, op. 2, d. 1166, ll. 15–18 (August 4–16, 1941).

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this plywood attire bare."[40] In other words, these August entries are all about the absurd futility of disguise, masking, and covering the real.

Second, the war began to take its toll on Eisenstein's body and spirit as the few real and symbolic benefits of the bombing—the breakdown of walls and neighborly camaraderie—began to recede already at the end of the summer. "After a night with sirens from 1:00 until 3:30, I saw myself in the mirror: I clearly look just like—the Arbat. The same rows of sandbags under my eyes as it has under its windows. *L'Homme a l'ocillet*—damn."[41] A year later, things were even worse. In evacuation in Alma Ata he wrote:

> At one time I compared the broken windows on the Arbat with empty eye sockets—wow, so unexpected and rich. Now I feel like a fire-ravaged bomb-site and the orbits of my own bleary eyes feel almost physically like burned out, broken windows. Something is stinging them from the inside, like smoke, and there are thin red stripes all around them on the edges. My vision is singed. . . .My eyes are so dilated into emptiness that the dark circle of the eye socket is visible around the object. Or the eye has retreated so deeply into itself, inside me, that I can see a frame around my field of vision.42

Framing of this kind is a common film device that can take many forms, but is expected to have the effect of distancing viewers from emotional or psychological immersion and of making us aware that we are watching a constructed narrative. Even if Eisenstein was not intentionally describing the framing of his vision by his irritated eyelids, the implication of this passage is that he has retreated into isolation behind a smoky window and a reconstructed wall. The direct sensory-emotional experience of the previous year was now tempered by its dialectical partner, the distant, rational, and intellectual, and its fractal personal withdrawal and reflection.

The bombing of Moscow in the summer and fall of 1941 is given one final postscript in the memoirs Eisenstein composed in 1946, when he was recovering from the heart attack that nearly killed him (after finishing Part II of *Ivan the Terrible*). The memoirs are written, not unlike the diaries, in a free associative style. Individual chapters move from subject to loosely connected subject, but usually with a hidden logic or a connecting thread. This chapter, titled in German, "*Wie sag ich's meinem Kinde*" (What to tell the children?), is about secrets and silences and hiding truths in plain sight. It is one of the places where he described himself as both an ever-infantile, obedient child and a wily rebel against all authority figures.[43] It is also where he states his critique of Sigmund Freud. Eisenstein's thinking was heavily influenced by Freud, but he rejected what he saw as Freud's emphasis on and narrow view of sex. The relevant part of that critique is that for Eisenstein sex was only one form, one model, or one vessel for the kinds of dualisms and dialectics I have been discussing. As a form (two distinct entities come together in a moment

40. In French in the original: *bryo*, *pestiféré*.

41. RGALI, f. 1923, op. 2, d. 1166, ll. 18–19 (August 16, 1941). *L'homme à l'oeillet* is the title of a painting by Jan Van Eyck (1435) that depicts a man with big bags under his eyes.

42. RGALI, f. 1923, op. 2, d. 1168, 1. 59 (July 7, 1942); my thanks to Marina Alexandrova for help translating this passage.

43. Eisenstein, *Selected Works: Beyond the Stars*, 424–53.

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of *ekstasis* to produce a transcendent out-of-body experience), Eisenstein saw it as almost infinitely replicable in other human activities, including those that do not involve desire.[44] Eisenstein discusses these subjects in more detail elsewhere; here it comes up because sex represents a fundamental principle of form. Like Chinese calligraphy, "the meaning is entirely forgotten and the lines and forms are appreciated in and for themselves."[45] He is citing Lin Yutang, a Chinese writer and translator, whose many mid-century books in English popularized Chinese culture in the US and Europe. In this passage, according to Eisenstein's reading of Lin, form both conceals meaning and reveals its formal origins (the origins of calligraphic ideograms) in animal form and movement.

For Eisenstein, this submergence of original meaning in form is a perfect example of the way form taps into our sensory-emotional, pre-logical, pre-cognitive responses, allowing content to emerge later on, and then to create something meaningful in the dialectic tension between the two.[46] After his riffs on Freud and calligraphy, Eisenstein tells us that he read Lin Yutang's book, *The Importance of Living,* during the fall of 1941, which is in the months after the initial July bombing he described in his diary, when bombs were still falling. He does not tell us any more about the book here, but he portrays his experience of the bombing quite differently now, as an entirely individual and walled-off, indoor experience. After the summer nights in the courtyard, surrounded by his neighbors and the potato plants, the cold, rainy autumn kept everyone inside behind their black-out curtains. The same cats wandered from apartment to apartment, but now the doors were open because people were fleeing Moscow and abandoning their things.[47] He introduced this section on form, sex, calligraphy, and the bombing of Moscow with several statements about the human body as representative of artistic form and form as the vessel that allows artists to be present but hidden in the works they create.[48] He ends the chapter by saying that, unlike his domineering father and his brilliant but difficult teacher, Vsevolod Meyerhold, both of whom kept secrets from him, Eisenstein put everything out in the open: "And—did you know, the most effective ways of hiding something is to put it on display."[49]

The main theme of *The Importance of Living* is similar to Tolstoi's belief, embodied by Pierre Bezukhov, that bumbling around a burning city, trying to help the people you see, living day to day, is a better way to live life than to perform great feats and grand gestures. Eisenstein injects another example here, remembering Meyerhold's teaching method was to put on dazzling performances that Eisenstein was remembering as brilliant but frustrating "mirages and dreams" that made him want to be exactly the opposite kind of teacher. But something else is going on in this chapter connected with the reference to Meyerhold: "When you work, there is no time to weave the invisible

44. Ibid., 437.

45. Ibid., 440.

46. Another iteration of this set of ideas can be found in *Metod*, Naum Kleiman, ed. (Moscow 2002), 2:415.

47. Eisenstein, *Selected Works: Beyond the Stars*, 424–53.

48. Ibid., 439

49. Ibid., 453.

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golden thread of invention that leads into daydream. When you are working, you have to do things."[50] That summer and fall, I believe that Eisenstein decided it was time to give up his natural caution and risk everything, not in a grand gesture, but as an artist, not dreaming but doing the work that he loved and doing it properly, bringing individual and collective into a productive, transformative, dialectical attunement.

He continued to write in his diary about taking action that could make his mark on the world, about not living "in eternal expectation." Throughout the rest of August and all of September, his diaries became unusually self-reflective. On August 23, he wrote the first of several notes about Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* and its message about living life with awareness of time passing and not wasting time on unimportant things.[51] In September, he threw himself into work on *Ivan the Terrible*, neglecting his job at the studio and reading piles of books on a wide variety of related historical, political, and artistic topics. Then in October, after Nazi troops were threatening Moscow itself, on the very eve of the mass evacuation, he wrote the long confessional entry in English, to free himself to speak about all the shameful things he thinks he had done: "Gosh, to *live* a week, a day, an hour—And . . .work on John [*Ivan the Terrible*]. And never mind. . . .I do not do something and then I suffer of not having done it—And often I do something and then I see I might not have done it."[52] While working intensively on *Ivan* again, for the first time since the war began and recording the nights when bombs fell, as he sat at his desk expecting bombs to fall, he filled ten pages with instances of shame and regret, each one framed as doing or not doing.

Filmmaking is invariably a public art form, a public, collective act, but one that is composed of the sensibilities of multiple individuals and addressed to another collective of individuals. Eisenstein experienced the ruptures created by the bombing as interpenetrating public and private events; as visual and visible and visceral; intellectual and experiential. He saw and felt and discovered not just new fears, but also new connections, new hierarchies, new structures, and even new Tolstoian definitions of heroism as ordinary, everyday acts of work and service. These new forms of public/private dialectics taught him how to behave and convinced him what he had to do next—and how hard it would be. Even as summer turned to fall and he retreated into his own private world, he did so with a new positive understanding of the public and the collective and, I think, a determination to make the film he wanted to make, whatever the cost. For most of the next five years—in Moscow, in evacuation in Alma Ata, and back again in Moscow—that determination would be tested, but he did not retreat: he had discovered he had to "do things," and the magnificent achievement of his *Ivan the Terrible* is the result.

50. Ibid., 451–52.
51. RGALI, f. 1923, op. 2, d. 1167, 1. 14 (August 23, 1941).
52. RGALI, f. 1923, op. 2, d. 1167, 1. 32–41 (September 16, 1941).

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