Cults, cuts and controversies: An essay on the relationship between State and Cinema in Russia from 1896-2014, with particular reference to the analogous connection between Eisenstein and Tarkovsky- how far did the State exert power over film?

"The artist exists because the world is not perfect. Art would be useless if the world were perfect, as man wouldn't look for harmony, but would simply live in it. Art is born out of an ill-designed world."[1] So said Andrei Tarkovsky, widely regarded as the greatest Russian director, indeed one of the greatest directors, of all time- a man who lived in a world that was not merely imperfect but utterly dystopian. Cinema has for over a century provided a vehicle for artists not just to express themselves, but to express the reality in which they live; for much of the 20th century nowhere was this expression more of a necessity than in the nightmarish, totalitarian USSR, a place where "art" was reduced to a tool of the state, subordinated to the practical goals and ideology of the Communist regime.

Much debate has arisen over titanic figures such as Eisenstein- was he a Bolshevik myrmidon or a ferociously independent minded artisan who masked his true creative spirit behind a veneer of government decreed sensibility? The evidence for such questions, both from primary sources and from scholars decades later, offers an illuminating and moving narrative of artistic integrity in the face of repression and the power of film as a medium, not to mention its perdurable historical relevance.

Throughout the history of Russia, film has provided a means of disseminating propaganda to the masses on behalf of the ruling elite, most pervasively by the Communist rulers of the USSR. Owing to Russia's comparative backwardness, the state failed to harness the power of cinema during the Tsarist period, a time in which film was introduced to the USSR (1896) by the Lumière brothers- the first filmmakers in history. The birth of Russian cinematic propaganda came in the Great War which provoked an entirely new understanding of the political potential of cinema,[2] a foreshadowing of what was to come over the next century. Any propaganda value this may have had for the Tsar, who infamously derided cinema, was negated by his impending overthrow and execution in the February and October Revolutions of 1917.

Since the days of Peter the Great, Russia had sought to emulate the more modern and advanced West, including in art. The progress of the nation, both moral and material, was measured according to a Western paradigm which dictated all aesthetic conventions. This centuries old protocol was rescinded by the Bolsheviks, who sought to proselytize a new form of art based on the avant-garde, one which would permeate all art forms, including cinema. Though it was first assumed that the Revolution would extend only to the political sphere,[3] it soon became apparent that the previously

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[1] https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/16014.Andrei_Tarkovsky

[2] N. Reeves, The Power of Film Propaganda: Myth or Reality (New York, 2004), p.58

3 O. Figes, Natasha's Dance (London, 2002), p.66

4 O. Figes, Natasha's Dance (London, 2002, p.436

5 Samoe vazhnoe iz vsekhiskustv, Lenin o kino (Moscow, 1963), p. 124, cited in O. Figes, Natasha's Dance (London, 2002), p.438

6 L. Trotsky, Problems of everyday life and other writings on culture and science (New York, 1973) pp.31-5

untapped realm of film was to be not only galvanised, but politicised. Lenin himself was explicit about this intention; "*For us the most important of all the arts is cinema"*[4] he proclaimed. Trotsky reiterated this sentiment, associating cinema with a youthful exuberance which could resonate with the emergent "young" society of the USSR.[5]

The Bolshevik regime of the 1920s recognised that film did not merely represent life, as other art did, but depicted it. Vertov's *Man With a Movie Camera (1929)* embodied this, preferring a Joycean depiction of everyday life over a conventional narrative. Anatoly Lunacharsky was appointed as head of *Narkompros*, the "People's Commissariat for Enlightenment" and would go on to lay the foundations of the cultural doctrine of "Socialist Realism" to which all artists within the USSR were expected to conform. The post-revolutionary directors of Russia were expected to depict the world in the name of the Revolution, to capture life as it *ought* to be.[6]

The most celebrated of directors at this time was Eisenstein, whose films epitomised the expectations of Socialist Realism. For example, in *Potemkin (1925)*, Eisenstein visually deconstructs the concept of God through a rapid montage (icon-axe-icon-sabre) to challenge the viewers presumptions about religion.[7] Eisenstein also incorporated current events into his works in support of the government; after Lenin's denouncement of Kerensky as a Bonapartist counter-revolutionary, Eisenstein depicted Kerensky in a sequence of *October(1928)* via intersecting images of Kerensky (living opulently in the Winter Palace) with Napoleon Bonaparte.

During the Stalinist epoch cinematic propaganda became prevalent to the point of omnipresence; Stalin loved the cinema, frequently watching the latest works in the Kremlin and intervening personally in their production to dictate plot details and other minor elements he found unsatisfactory.[8] *The Fall of Berlin (1950)* provides a quintessential example of Stalinist moviemaking, with history re-written to include Stalin as the centre piece of global events, a God-like saviour, military genius, wise philosopher, poet and peacemaker beloved by the ordinary people (who sing his praises in a multitude of languages during the film's nauseating climax.) Even as far back as the 1930s the basic formula was emerging- Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky (1938)* had delighted Stalin. Its depiction of national heroism and patriotic leadership was harnessed to boost morale at the outbreak of war[9]- disregarding the fact that the film had been banned for the previous year in light of the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact, a prime example of censorship in the USSR where films were subordinated to the regime's current ideological predilections.

This tradition would continue and evolve over the decades, producing some propagandist efforts which have since become highly regarded in their own right as works of film. *I Am Cuba* (1964) was made against the backdrop of the Cuban Missile Crisis, an all time high in tensions between the USSR and the USA. The film embodies the quaintly patronising narrative style typical of Socialist Realism. Tired of "Yankee" interference, Cuba against all odds attempts to take control of its destiny, led by the usual suspects of exploited peasants and ideologically awakened students. The final act of the

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[6] R. Taylor, Inside the Film Factory: New Approaches to Russian and Soviet Cinema, 1917-1919 (Cambridge, 1979), p.129

[7] J. Leyda, Film Form: Essays on Film Theory (New York, 1949), p.62

[8] J. Godwin, Eisenstein: Cinema and History (Urbana, 1993), p.162

[9] O. Figes, Natasha's Dance (London, 2002), p.496

film marks the appearance of a bearded guerrilla fighter who fights for the people and is in turn sheltered by them- a living incarnation of the revolutionary spirit who obviously represents Fidel Castro. Despite being patent propaganda the film has since been hailed as one of the finest directed films of the 1960s,[10] creative and ambitious in the tradition of Fellini, Eisenstein and Truffaut.

As the years wore on and the 1917 Revolution became a distant memory, the government of the USSR became less interested in the glorification of major events, emphasising instead the qualities of the individual. *Moscow Does not Believe in Tears (1979)* showcases the resilience of Katerina in bleak circumstances- a continuation of the strong Soviet woman archetype first popularised decades prior in *Mother* (*1926*- itself inspired by Maxim Gorky's 1905 novel of the same name.) Films from the 1970s onwards tended to be less political than in the generation immediately after the Revolution- though artistic freedom was still non-existent the government seemed less concerned with the politicisation of cinema, Socialist Realism having seemingly peaked as a cinematic genre from the 1920s-60s, palliating during Khrushchev's "Thaw" as an indicator of de-Stalinization.

Despite the repressive nature of Socialist Realism, directors still asserted independent creative freedom where they could. Many of Eisenstein's "political" efforts were, in fact, equally personal to him- an egotist focalisation which would politically undermine the works of his successor Tarkovsky decades later. Eisenstein's social commentaries had, by his own private admission, "*less to do with the real miseries of social injustice but completely with what is the real prototype of every tyranny- the father's despotism."*[11] In the final scene of Ivan the Terrible, Eisenstein uses colour to achieve what he described as the "*Wagnerian harmony of sound and colour,"*[12] which portrayed Ivan (allegorical Stalin) in Hell and was inspired by the works of a German composer, hardly a prescriptive adherence to Socialist Realism from this most supposedly sycophantic of directors.[13]

The most pronounced deviation from doctrine Eisenstein made is seen towards the end of his life, in the "mutilated epic" *¡Que viva México!,* the unfinished work Eisenstein was inspired to make while on his trip to South America. Many artists were attracted to Latin America at this time, owing to the emergent Surrealist movement and Eisenstein was no exception; he was also impressed that Mexico had played host to a Socialist revolution in 1910. His fascination with the country dated back at least to 1921, when at the age of 22 "*his artistic career started with a Mexican topic"*[14] as he put on a theatrical version of *The Mexican in Moscow.* It is perplexing to consider that the director who in years past had seemingly been subject to the whims of the Party, was now making his own film, in a foreign land with a foreign cast, shot entirely in his own style without the input or blessing of the *Narkompros*. This major deviation, combined with the clear subversion of the Stalinist Cult in *Ivan Part Two* demonstrates that towards the end of his career Eisenstein was, in spite of great personal risk, willing to place his artistic values ahead of those imposed upon him by the regime.

While Eisenstein masked his personal artistic endeavours behind a veil of historical glories and ideology, his successor Andrei Tarkovsky made little attempt to hide the egoist nature of his films, all of which were focalised through his own mind; while Eisenstein appeared, at least on the surface, to

[10] https://notevenpast.org/i-am-cuba-sale/
[11] R. Bergan, Eisenstein: A Life in Conflict (London, 1977), p.28
[12] Kozlov, Artist and the Shadow of Ivan, p. 123, cited in O. Figes, Natasha's Dance, (London, 2002), p.440
[13] Rybakov, Dust and Ashes (London, 1994), p.116
[14] R. Bergan, Eisenstein: A Life in Conflict (London 1977), p.187

portray what was "outside", Tarkovsky preferred to narrate what was "inside."[15] Tarkovsky was dismissive of much of Eisenstein's theories and works, though it must be noted that most of Eisenstein's later theories were still unavailable during Tarkovsky's lifetime. Regarding Eisenstein's directing style he said; "*Eisenstein's montage dictum, as I see it, contradicts the very basis of the unique process whereby a film affects the audience."*[16] Tarkovsky strongly opposed the Party approved concept of montage and believed that the basis of art cinema (film art) is the internal rhythm of the shot; intellectual montage would be Sisyphean for an egoist like Tarkovsky, the montage dictum would never aptly represent the inner world of the artist as it could sequential or historical events as Eisenstein had depicted.

Understanding the political landscape over the two men's careers easily explains the seemingly vast differences in style between them. Eisenstein's films were a part of the 1920s Soviet avant-garde, part of a movement which extended far beyond the realm of cinema into every facet of life; films were made to encapsulate the "youthful exuberance" described by Trotsky, and non-compliance was simply not an option for artists, Eisenstein would have to obfuscate whatever egoist proclivities he had lest he incur the wrath of the Party. Cinematically, Tarkovsky developed during the Khrushchev "Thaw" of the 1950s, and matured during the 1960s. His films, as with the New Wave of just about every other developed nation, reflected archetypal 1960s artistic concerns of Individualism and Poeticism. Of course, there was also a sense of artistic rebellion through the rejecting of cinematic precepts which included Eisenstein's montage.[17]

Paradoxically, this rejection was coupled with an undeniable fascination by Tarkovsky for Eisenstein; apparently, when preparing to film Leonardo's painting "Young Lady with a Juniper" for a sequence in *Zerkalo,* Tarkovsky insisted on using a Leonardo book that used to belong to Eisenstein and flatly refused to use any other one. This love-hate relationship seems to have leaned more towards the former for Tarkovsky, rebelling against Eisenstein in vein of a child to a parent. Naum Kleiman had personally witnessed Tarkovsky watching a reconstruction of Eisenstein's controversial unfinished film *Bezhin Meadow,* and described Tarkovsky as being "*extremely moved by it despite himself*."[18] Despite having been typecast by many as a sycophant for the Party, Eisenstein's creative spirit seems to have endured well beyond his death- recognised, if grudgingly, even by Tarkovsky. It is likely no coincidence that *Bezhin Meadow* was to be the film that moved Tarkovsky, the same film demonised and scrapped by the Party (possibly even Stalin himself) for being "socially, artistically and politically unacceptable." In other words, probably the closest to Eisenstein's true creative vision.

Tarkovsky's techniques were truly revolutionary (even more so than those which followed the actual revolution) but nevertheless were found irksome by the regime; Tarkovsky was something of a creative wild card, a maverick of the new intelligentsia whose art was subject to his whims alone, not those of the government. Tarkovsky went further than any other director in asserting his creative freedom, often being forced to obfuscate his films (like Eisenstein) to the point of incomprehensibility to bypass the censors. In 1974 Tarkovsky produced an autobiographical film,

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[15] Nariman Skakov, The Cinema of Tarkovsky: Labyrinths of Space and Time (New York, 2012), p. 64

[16] 1. Andrei Tarkovsky, Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema, trans. by K. Hunter-Blair (London: Faber and Faber, 1989),p. 183.

[17] Lev Anninsky, Shestidesiatniki I my (The Sixties Generation and We) (Moscow VTPO Kinotsentr, 1991), p.190-196, Quoted in Johnson and Petrie, p.14

[18] R. Bergan, Eisenstein: A Life in Conflict (London 1977), p.355

Zerkalo (Mirror), which was criticized as being labyrinth in form and parabolic in nature.[19] The film juxtaposed external experiences (outside) with interior monologues, thoughts and memories (inside) with the change often signalled by an abrupt transition into black and white. The end of the decade saw the release of *Stalker* (1979), which had an average take length of 68 seconds. The film provoked controversy for its content; set in Estonia it is the most politically charged of Tarkovsky's films, a story of grim decay and stagnant degeneration, interpreted by many opponents (and supporters) as an attack on the repression of intellectual freedoms in the USSR[20].Tarkovsky's direction was as perplexing as it was radical, departing from all previous conventions in favour cultivating a wholly idiosyncratic style. Tarkovsky epitomised the *auteur* theory, a director who exerts such control over all aspects of his film that he may be considered its sole creative driving force- a theory to which many scholars regard Eisenstein as the progenitor.[21]

Tarkovsky came to almost single-handedly define the Soviet New Wave, a movement perhaps even more impressive than its foreign counterparts when the repressive nature of Soviet society and art is taken into consideration. No other Russian director was able to maintain creative autonomy in this fashion for so long, defying governmental doctrine and ignoring the accusations of 'formalism' and 'egotism'[22] to focus on crafting a perfected expression of inner feeling; true, real art.

Of course, Tarkovsky was far from the first Russian director to court controversy. It is unavoidable that in such a repressive environment that creativity and government dogma will inevitably lead to conflict, and so they did, even as far back as Eisenstein. Nowhere was this clearer than in his biopic *Ivan The Terrible Part Two* (1958) which was only released (unsurprisingly)years after the death of Stalin. Ivan provided an inspiration to Stalin, usurping Peter as the Tsar of the moment in the minds of many Bolsheviks- a man admired for his ability to unite Russia through warfare and murder-cruelty with a higher purpose. Stalin had loved the first *Ivan*, portraying him as brutal but patriotic and paternal by the ordinary people who revered him, much as Stalin liked to view himself. However, the sequel became much more politicised and critical in tone- Eisenstein's conception of Ivan did not match the official one, and more importantly it did not match Stalin's.[23] Upon seeing a preview of the film, Stalin lamented "*this is no film- it is a nightmare*!"[24] The film was banned indefinitely in the USSR, such was Stalin's anger. A third instalment was commissioned, under the expectation that it would conform to Socialist Realism and undo the damage done to Eisenstein's reputation by the disastrous Part 2. However, Eisenstein pushed the parallels even further- depicting Ivan as a deranged psychopath, whose eyes and ears fill with blood until he is deaf and blind, banging his head on the floor in madness and repentance. When Cherkasov, playing Ivan, asked the purpose of the repentance scene, Eisenstein responded bluntly; "*Stalin has killed more people and fails to repent. Let him see this and repent*."[25] Far from repenting, Stalin ordered the film destroyed and the project scrapped- the film was never completed.

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[19] Nariman Skakov, The Cinema of Tarkovsky: Labyrinths of Space and Time (New York, 2012), p.114
[20] S. Martin, Andrei Tarkovsky (London, 2011), cited in N. Skakov, The Cinema of Tarkovsky: Labyrinths of Space and Time (New York, 2012), p.160
[21] http://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2010/03/02/an-eisenstein-double-bill
[22] J. Gianvito, Andrei Tarkovsky: Interviews, (New York, 2004) p.32
[23] Iuzovsky, Eizenshtein v vospominaiiakh sovremenikov (Moscow, 1974), p. 402, cited in 0. Figes Natasha's Dance (London, 2002), p. 499
[24] Kozlov, Artist and the Shadow of Ivan, p.123, cited in).Figes, Natasha's Dance (London, 2002), p.500
[25] Kozlov, Artist and the shadow of Ivan, p.124, cited in O. Figes, Natasha's Dance (London, 2002), p.498

Eisenstein's other project *Bezhin Meadow* was also shot down as formalistic and seditious to the Revolutionary cause. In 1936 Shumiatsky ordered a rewrite of the script, with the addition of a lengthy pro-Stalin speech as was the custom for any film in the 1930s. Eisenstein protested and in 1937 the film was cancelled and funding withdrawn- Eisenstein was threatened with 'severe consequences' should he seek external funds from outside the USSR.[26] Pravda accused Eisenstein of being a formalist and religious sympathiser[27], charges he no longer attempted to deny as he became bolder in his approach to cinema and creative freedom- threats against his mother, forcing his return from Mexico[28] had hardened his resolve against Stalin- providing a possible catalyst for the more open attacks of *Ivan* Parts 2 and 3.

Controversial relationships between the government and film industry are not, however, limited to the era of the USSR in Russia; it is a simmering issue which resonates in the modern era today. Andrei Zvyagintsev's 2014 film *Leviathan,* widely hailed as a masterpiece (winner of Best Screenplay and Best Foreign Film), was met with a hostile reception from many in Russia due to its highly negative portrayal of life in the Soviet Union. Despite Oscar nominations the film split opinion in Russia and sparked a furious controversy over whether it undermines Vladimir Putin. Culture minister Vladimir Medinsky accused it of being a negative film, which promotes "*existential hopelessness."*[29] NKVD death squads and forced labour may have had their day, but the hostile reception and controversy directed towards *Leviathan* reminds us that the legacy of Socialist Realism as not merely a genre but also as a culture and mindset, still persists today in 21st century Russia, an ugly monument to a deeply repressive and brutal past thought long since gone. Medinsky claimed "*there is not a single positive hero and the characters are not real Russians,"* and accused Zvyagintsev of cynically exploiting anti-Russian feeling to win awards. "*What does he love? Golden statuettes and red carpets, that's pretty clear*," Medinsky said, adding the film "*in its rush for international success, is opportunistic beyond belief. It spits on Russia's elected officials."*[30] Harsh and passionate words over artistic choices seems odd to Western ears- a culture secretary attacking a politically subversive film has definite echoes of the accusations of 'formalism' and 'reactionary-ism' which were thrown about so wantonly during the height of the Terror and which presents an uncanny parallel with the treatment of Pasternak when forced to decline his Nobel prize.

Even the Russian Orthodox Church, found itself aligning with the government to condemn the film, which depicts corrupt and hypocritical clerics. Spokesman Vsevolod Chaplin had told Izvestia daily: "*It's obvious that it's made to cater to a Western audience, or rather to the Western elite, since it consciously repeats popular myths about Russia*."[31] It should be noted that he later acknowledged not having seen any of the film himself. "'*Leviathan' is an evil film, and there should be no distribution for evil films,"* Cardinal Frolov told Izvestia newspaper. "*We'll ask the Culture Ministry not to let the film appear in cinemas, and urge them to create an 'Orthodox Hollywood.*'" It is not at all difficult to imagine these same words coming from the mouth of Stalin decades prior- a time

[26] D. Bordwell, The Cinema of Eisenstein (London, 2005), p. 92
[27] O fil'me Bezhin Lug, Pravda (19/03/1939), p.3, cited in D. Bordwell, The Cinema of Eisenstein (London, 2005), p.155
[28] Kozlov, Artist and the shadow of Ivan, p.124, cited in O. Figes, Natasha's Dance (London, 2002), p.496
[29] http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/oscars/11357997/Oscar-nominated-Leviathan-sparks-Russian-row.html
[30] https://www.rt.com/news/222987-hollywood-orthodox-leviathan-ban/
[31] http://myocn.net/russian-orthodox-leaders-object-award-winning-film-leviathan-call-for-creation-orthodox-hollywood/

when, undoubtedly, any film portraying the Church or any religion in a positive light would be condemned in equally harsh terms, an irony apparently lost on Frolov.

In conclusion, while the worst excesses of the Stalinist epoch have long since passed, their legacy endures, fermenting tension between those who govern life and those who seek to represent and depict it. Like his the great conductor, Shostakovich, Eisenstein was more of a rebel than many (including Tarkovsky) ever gave him credit for. Likewise, many works of Socialist Realism, despite the grim connotations of the genre, have come to be regarded as highly significant and even great films, worthy of aesthetic, cultural and historical acclaim. While the totalitarian USSR undoubtedly caused untold suffering to its artists, let us not forget that as Tarkovsky said, it is suffering, the imperfect world, which imbues the artist with purpose and evokes the most raw and deep feelings within them. The relationship between State and Art, perhaps too complex to decipher by modern Western eyes, can best be surmised from the Soviet perspective, from the perspective of Sergei Eisenstein, who shortly before his death, explained to an unnamed fellow director in terms that would undoubtedly be found highly pleasing by Dostoevsky, his reasoning for carrying on in the face of such adversity; "*This is the inspiring tradition of our people, our nation, our literature."*[32]

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[32] D. Bordwell, The Cinema of Eisenstein (London, 2005), p. 170

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