

Sergey Eisenstein

Gregory Woods



Gregory Woods' handsome new book, Homintern (Yale, £25), has the subtitle 'How Gay Culture Liberated the Modern World'. This excerpt sketches some adventures of the great Soviet film director.

Sergey Mikhailovich Eisenstein loved one man intensely for a long time. Grigori Alexandrov was a professional partner – as Eisenstein’s assistant director – but probably not a sexual partner. Eisenstein’s diaries of his 1926 trip to the fleshpots of Berlin, where he is known to have visited both gay male and lesbian nightclubs as well as Magnus Hirschfeld’s Institute for Sexual Science, seem to contain coded erotic references to Alexandrov. According to the Polish writer Waclaw Solski, on one occasion when Eisenstein said that, unlike the Hollywood film-makers, he was not interested in girls, ‘Grigori Alexandrov suddenly burst into a short laugh, but quickly stopped and turned red’ – which proves nothing, since one can think of many reasons for his embarrassment at having let slip the laughter.

Eisenstein himself said to his biographer Marie Seton: ‘A lot of people say I’m homosexual. I never have been, and I’d tell you if it were true.’ But he did own up to having ‘bisexual tendencies’ in an ‘intellectual way’, like Balzac and Zola. In the United States in the early 1930s, he said to Joseph Freeman that, ‘had it not been for Leonardo, Freud, Marx, Lenin and the movies, I would, in all probability, have been another Oscar Wilde’. Yet if these cultural and political distractions led him away from Wildedom, or compensated him for the repression of it, he had other cultural interests that might just as easily have had the opposite effect. For a start, he had a particular interest in Oscar Wilde himself. To promote the Proletkult Theatre’s production of an adaptation of Jack London’s *The Mexican*, which he had

designed, Eisenstein adapted the publicity that had heralded Wilde's arrival in New York. When he went to London in November 1929, he later said, 'I found the authentic atmosphere of Oscar Wilde'. It seems to have been what he was looking for.

Eisenstein co-wrote a pantomime, *Columbine's Garter*, partly influenced by Jean Cocteau and Francis Poulenc's *Les Mariées de la Tour Eiffel*. He had a photograph of Cocteau, which he had cut out of the magazine *Je Sais Tout*, pinned to the wall in his flat. He must have been thrilled, then, to meet Cocteau when he went to Paris early in 1930; but embarrassed on the famous occasion a few nights later when he accompanied the Surrealist poet Paul Éluard to a performance of Cocteau's *La Voix humaine* at the Comédie Française, and Éluard shouted out at the traduced lover, on stage with her telephone, 'Who are you talking to? Monsieur Desbordes?' Jean Desbordes being Cocteau's then lover, this was intended, and taken, as a ribald joke at the expense of the author. A row broke out, and Éluard had to be ejected from the auditorium before the play could continue. Cocteau did not associate the offence, if any, with Eisenstein and when, a short while later, the Russian was threatened with deportation – he had fallen victim to a flurry of anti-Soviet feeling in France – both Cocteau and Colette supported him, even getting him a meeting with Philippe Berthelot, Director of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. While still in Paris, Eisenstein frequented Sylvia Beach's bookshop Shakespeare and Company, where he was pleased to find Paul Verlaine's pornographic *Hombres* being sold, as he put it, 'under the counter quite openly'. He attended the salon of Marie-Laure de Noailles and was invited to visit her husband the vicomte in his villa at Hyères, but never actually got there. James Joyce gave him a signed copy of *Ulysses*, which had just come out; and Gertrude Stein, whom he met at Tristan Tzara's home, gave him advice on his imminent trip to the United States.

He does seem to have been one of those men whose homosexual aspect could flourish only when they were away from home. One biographer sums up his active sexual life as follows: 'It seems likely that Eisenstein experimented with homosexual sex – mainly with young men for money in Western Europe and Mexico – as well as occasionally sleeping with women, something he was pleased to hint at in his memoirs.' Travel took him to places where he found not only those young men but, perhaps more importantly, prominent cultural figures whom he respected and who were managing to live more or less openly with lovers of the same sex. Berlin, Paris and Wilde's London had all given him such glimpses of sexual and cultural possibility. As he set sail for New York on 8 May 1930, expecting

Alexandrov to follow a short while later, he is likely to have anticipated more of the same.

The New World gave him a prickly welcome, however. He was greeted with an anti-Semitic and anti-Communist campaign against his presence. In California he met Greta Garbo and watched Marlene Dietrich being directed by Josef von Sternberg, but his own dreams of film-making in Hollywood came to nothing. Instead, he went down to Mexico to make *Que Viva México!* with Upton Sinclair. Although the film was never completed by Eisenstein himself – it existed in three inferior versions until the 1970s, when Grigori Alexandrov managed to obtain the rushes and reconstruct a more plausibly Eisensteinian version – it contains what have been seen as striking moments of directorial self-revelation when the camera lingers on the bodies of oppressed peasant workers. Any analysis of its political message should take into account that, like Gide's *L'Immoraliste* or Thomas Mann's *Der Töd in Venedig*, this is a northern homosexual's southern text and has important things to express in that regard.

On 19 April 1932, Eisenstein set sail from New York on the *Europa*. The world of, if not the desire for, the Mexican peasant was left far in their wake as, for the duration of the crossing, he shared a table with those two cosmopolitan queens, Noël Coward and the critic and actor Alexander Woollcott. Meanwhile, some trunks that Eisenstein had sent to Hollywood from Mexico were opened by US Customs and found to contain many of his homosexually explicit drawings and a sheaf of photographs of male nudes. On 27 October 1934, he married Pera Attasheva, an actress and journalist. This was clearly a marriage of convenience: the couple lived separately and, far from their relationship's ever being consummated, Eisenstein himself said that they never so much as kissed. He did not even mention his wife in his memoirs. To an extent, if intended to mask his true sexuality, the marriage worked: the mere fact of his having a wife, albeit one he did not live with, gave the impression of a man who was heterosexual but chaste.

Rumours of homosexuality continued to surface, it seemed, whenever Eisenstein formed a close relationship with another man. For instance, when Paul Robeson spent a fortnight in Moscow at the end of 1934, he saw Eisenstein virtually every day, giving rise to a shiver of suggestive gossip. Similarly, there would be unfounded rumours about the relationship between Eisenstein and Nikolai Cherkassov, the star of his films *Alexander Nevsky* (1938) and *Ivan the Terrible* (1942-44, 1946). Of the films Eisenstein never made, among the more intriguing was a proposal for a

piece about Lawrence of Arabia, whose complex psychology the director felt he might capture, like that of Ivan, in pure images. However, the career of Grigori Alexandrov, after the two men's return from the United States, gives an impression of the film-maker Eisenstein could never have become, despite some of his enthusiasms. Alexandrov successfully turned his hand to making Hollywood-style musicals for the entertainment of the masses. The nearest Eisenstein came to such work – although Alexandrov's first musical was a project which Eisenstein had himself turned down – was the closing reel, in colour, of *Ivan the Terrible*, which, if arguably camp in some respects, is more genuinely sinister in its raucous glamour than any musical comedy could have survived being.



Eisenstein drawing inspired by D H Lawrence's short story
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