

Contributi/9

Stuck in-Between: Supple Gender in Eisenstein's Alexander Nevsky (1938)

Natalya Khokholova

Articolo sottoposto a doppia *blind review*. Inviato il 31/01/2017. Accettato il 23/10/2017

Eisenstein's films as well as his sketches and conceptual essays are strongly suggestive of the artist's avant-gardist preference for independently functioning and floating limbs over articulate and emotionally responsive human characters¹. However, in his historical drama, *Alexander Nevsky* (1938), regardless of their marginal position and the scarcity of their appearances within a visual narrative of sequential shots, female characters guard and reaffirm the boundaries of the two ideological agendas: of the artist himself inspired by the revolutionary aptitudes of the modern art-form, and the authoritative office of the Soviet cinematography under Stalin. Women, in this Eisenstein production, happen to be *makers of meaning* who address both socialist realist (imposed on the artist) and Eisenstein's own, formalist aesthetics of *intellektual'noe kino* that was developed under the ideological climate of the Russian Revolution. This article uncovers how Sergei Eisenstein preserved his artistic autonomy and individuality in Stalin Prize-winning film *Alexander Nevsky* (1938) via the means of the avant-gardist device of *plasmaticness*. The study of Eisenstein's film, *Alexander Nevsky*, demonstrates that there is no give and take interaction between the spectator and the woman bodies represented on the screen, because formalist aesthetics is designed to work towards the functional dominance of art over people and their sentiments and desires.

«A work of art, understood dynamically, is just this process of arranging images in the feelings and mind of the spectator»².

¹ Marie Seton, Yon Barna, Rostislav Iurenev, David Bordwell, Oksana Bulgakowa, Anne Nesbet, and Khristin Thompson—produced a substantial amount of work on Eisenstein's Life and Art, in which they acknowledge Eisenstein's formalist aesthetics and his artistic appreciation of the engine-driven kinetics of moving objects. During his lifetime, for the uniqueness of his artistic visions, simultaneously Eisenstein was praised and criticized. For example, a third-rate director, David Maryan, provides enthusiastic, in the light of Stalinist judgment and censorship environment, although somewhat uncouth, evidential critique. I place it here as an example to demonstrate Eisenstein's non-conformist position among the majority of the Soviet filmmakers, intellectuals of that time, and his disconnect from the Socialist realist 'norm': «Formalism, formalism and once again formalism... This is a terrible disease with you. Formalism condemns you to loneliness; it is a world view of pessimists, who are in conflict with our era. I should say that I hate formalism with all my being, hate its elements in works of art, even when they are done by such masters as you. I became your opponent when I saw October. I saw the Revolution through your eyes. I did not see *Bezhin Meadow*, only excerpts concerning the fire, but that was enough. How could you make a fire the central episode in the process of kolkhoz building?». See A. J. LaValley and B. P. Scherr, *Eisenstein At 100*, New Brunswick 2001, p. 202.

² S. Eisenstein and L. Jay, *The Film Sense*, New York 1947, p. 17.

Eisenstein's contemporaries who were forced to become a witness to Eisenstein's case of tortured confessions and apologies to the authorities in regards to his controversial work *Bezhin Lug* (*Bezhin Meadow*) (1937), claim that, nevertheless, Eisenstein always had his way, his 'method' to deviate from the directives imposed by authorities via the means of caustic humor and his complete disregard of the trivial social interactions³. I would not go as far as James Agee (a film critic and a contemporary of Eisenstein), who claimed «both *Alexander Nevsky* and *Ivan the Terrible* were satires on Stalinism in the spirit of Swift's *Modest Proposal*»⁴, but I will look for the clues in the film of the artist's attempts to creatively digress, and will prove that the film *Alexander Nevsky* represents more than Eisenstein's conformist position. I believe Eisenstein knew what was exactly expected of him, and he delivered, (although one wheel of the film short), but equipped enough to protect his artistic autonomy⁵.

Although, Joseph Stalin is an iconic representation of the new Soviet Republic, which began to exist in 1918, and the Soviet Nation, a product of the Russian Revolution, the regime and ideology that he succeeded in creating brought back in a twisted manner all the canons and social disparity that the initial Russian revolutionaries strived to remove. Fortunately, for the Soviet Russia of the early years, 20-s and 30-s, the group of intellectuals managed to capture the true spirit of the Russian Revolution and were inspired not by the terror and a bloodshed but by the opportunity of seeing the new world order in scientifically fused human physical and intellectual labor⁶.

After two years of living in a vacuum of political oppression, which was an aftermath of his production of the controversial films such as *The General Line* (1929), *Bezhin Meadow* (1937), and extensive travels to the US and Mexico, in 1937, Eisenstein finally receives a direct order from Stalin to work on a film within the genre of historical drama. Eisenstein had an option to choose from the two suggested scripts: a story of heroic self-sacrifice of the peasant Ivan Susanin by Victor Shklovsky, and a screenplay about the celebrated battle on the Lake Chudskoe, allegedly designed and won by Prince of Novgorod, Alexander Nevsky, written by Pyotr Pavlenko, a Socialist Realist writer⁷. Eisenstein chose

³ M. Seton, *Sergei M. Eisenstein*, New York 1952, p. 282.

⁴ R. Bergan, *Sergei Eisenstein: A Life in Conflict*, Woodstock 1999, p. 284.

⁵ When the film was delivered to Stalin overnight to Kremlin for the preliminary screening, the one wheel was missing. Eisenstein left it behind because was editing Novgorod folk strife scenes. Surely no one dared to suggest to the Nation's Leader that the film he approved is an unfinished version. Thus, one may state that *Alexander Nevsky* (1938) satisfied the imposed Socialist Realist canonical themes of self-sacrifice, and the nation's unity in the face of a common enemy. See in J. Goodwin, *Eisenstein, Cinema, and History*, Urbana 1993, p. 162.

⁶ David C. Gillespie identifies 'the golden age' of the Soviet Cinema with the works from the year of 1924 by Alexander Dovzhenko and Alexander Medvedkin. He states that the 'clean sweep' of the 1917 October Revolution worked as launching force for a still back then young form of art, in which practice and theory were brought to the higher degree of mechanical and bio-form and its representational advancement.

⁷ N. Swallow, *Eisenstein: A Documentary Portrait*, London 2014, p. 122.

to work on the latter. Stalin eventually accepts the work, and expresses his appreciation to Eisenstein by calling him a true *Bolshevik*⁸.

In 1941, Eisenstein receives the Stalin Prize for his work on *Alexander Nevsky*. This event saves Eisenstein's life, but also provides grounds for rendering Eisenstein Stalin's 'go-getter' 'pleaser', and causes a variety of speculations about his artistic authenticity and integrity. This tarnishing of Eisenstein's reputation as corrupt conformist becomes widespread and even finds its reflection in Solzhenitsyn's short fiction work *A Day from the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (1962). Therefore, this is my intent to prove that regardless of the seemingly conformist organization of the film that is exemplary of the socialist realist ideologies and principles, Eisenstein remained true to the revolutionary avant-gardist aesthetics, and preserved his artistic autonomy. Eisenstein's films, which are identified as *intellektual'noe kino*, intend to stimulate a cerebral response in the spectator and to subjugate the audience to the ideas imposed by the moving image, unlike the early Hollywood productions, that made an emphasis, according to Laura Mulvey, on the visually pleasing female bodies that are stylized to be objectified and to serve as the outlets for fears and desires. This article sheds light on the representation of women in Sergei Eisenstein's historical epic film *Alexander Nevsky* (1938), within the double-layered framework of his aesthetics of plasmaticness and the imposed Socialist Realist canonical themes of heroism and self-sacrifice to uncover that avant-gardism is more a product of the Russian Revolution rather than socialist realism with its militant dogmas and rigidity of the social-racial hierarchies.

According to the biographical sources, Eisenstein expressed his great interest and admiration for Prince Alexander Yaroslavovitch Nevsky whose mythical genius was the key of the epic battle's success in its semi-scientifically calculated scheme⁹. Though Eisenstein was excited about finding creative ways to demonstrate Nevsky's crafty plan, he was well aware of the fact that this was his last chance to reinstate himself professionally, i.e. politically in the face of the authorities. Therefore, his film *Alexander Nevsky*, in the long run, appears to be highlighting the invincibility of the Russian spirit and is suggestive of the Soviet nation's strength and its unbreakable unity, in which Prince Alexander with his towering poise is reminiscent of the father of the nation. However, one cannot help but notice the otherworldly eerie designs of forms and objects that operate in a synchronized mode of mechanical repetition and resilience.

⁸ M. Seton, *Sergei M. Eisenstein*, cit., p. 386.

⁹ Eisenstein writes in his essay *Истинные пути изобретения* [*True Ways of Invention*] (1946): «Мне Александра непременно хочется сделать гением. Бытовое представление о гениальности — и не без основания — у нас всегда связано с чем-то вроде яблока Ньютона или прыгающей крышкой чайника матери Фарадея / I am certain I want to present Alexander as a genius. In our trivial perception of a genius — and not without a complete lack of reasoning — is associated with the Newton's apple or with a jumping lid of Faraday mother's kettle». *Истинные пути изобретения* (1946), Т. 1, pp. 176-184; *True Ways of Invention*, in Id., *Collection of Essays*, vol. 1, pp. 176-184. From С.Эйзенштейн. Избранные произведения: В 6т. М., 1, pp. 964-1971.

To put it simply, the film strikes its contemporary viewer as uncanny. Perhaps, firstly, it is because the film fluctuates between the two ideological agendas, as 'stuck in between'. The opening scenes of the film present scattered bones of animals and humans on the infertile soil of the steppe. This opening scene, consisting of two sequential shots, seems insignificant, but with a certain degree of consideration and a revision, provokes inquiries pertaining to Eisenstein's artistic conspiracies and preferences along the film, since the inanimate objects (skulls, a helmet, and an arrow) open the narrative, as if they sprang to life and, provoked by the camera, are ready to sing their part, as skulls and bones in Disney's *The Skeleton Dance* (1929)¹⁰. The eye of the camera first freezes on, and then zooms in front of the human bones, a pair of skulls. One of the skulls is bare, while the other sports a helmet.

The position of the arrow, 'stuck-in-between' the skulls, establishes the conceptual theme for the story in motion pictures, and orders the course of my inquiry. This motif 'stuck-in-between' is articulated to the audience when a blacksmith/armorer, Ignat narrates a pornographic folk tale, *The Hare and the Vixen*¹¹. A prolonged chase with the fox after the hare concludes with the fox getting jammed between the trunks of two birches. The hare sees the fox's vulnerable position and decides to sexually assault the predator. Eisenstein came across this tale while perusing the essays and papers of his friend and colleague, Victor Shklovsky, during one of his sleepless nights when he was sketching his action plan for *Alexander Nevsky*.

Eisenstein uses this story to establish the theme of the story and to highlight Alexander Nevsky's strategy to attack Germans on both sides, after pinning them down on the front. This state of in-betweenness is also reflective of Eisenstein's vulnerable mental state at the time of his working on *Alexander Nevsky* to satisfy the Soviet authorities and to remain true to himself and his art. The image becomes a leitmotif for heroic presence throughout the course of the film. The motivation that urges Prince Alexander to fight for Pskov is Russia's vulnerable position surrounded on the East side by Mongols, and from the West, by Teutonic Knights. Olga Danilovna, a maiden of Novgorod, throughout the course of the film is faced with the dilemma of choosing between the heroes: Vasily Buslai or Gavriilo Oleksich. Also, the sense of 'stuck-in-between', being stuck enchanted in between the image and idea, refers to the spectator.

The film answers the State requirements and presents the dogmatically outlined narrative of the historical heroic drama. But on the other level of thinking and visually experiencing it through, the film delivers the vision of the artist: the unfamiliar realm of plasticity, the organic synthesis of the characters' biomechanical movements and works with the synchronization of senses in regards to surrounding sound and landscape. Secondly, the film appears to be

¹⁰ A. Nesbet, *Savage Junctures: Sergei Eisenstein and the Shape of Thinking*, London 2003, p. 157.

¹¹ *Alexander Nevsky*, by Sergei Eisenstein, Petr Andreevich Pavlenko, and É. Tisse, dir. Sergei Eisenstein, perf. Nikolai Konstantinovich Cherkasov, Nikolai Pavlovich Okhlopov, and Andrei Lvovich Abrikosov, 49:06.

unusual due to the factor that although, the well-known Soviet actors play the stock characters of the Medieval Russian epic, there is a sense, as if alien invaders inhabit the presented universe. In order to further my logic, I have to provide a side-by-side reading of the features of both contesting artistic trends in the film, when canon is being challenged by the new and the revolutionary. As it has been mentioned above, the film represents Eisenstein's compromise to attend to the demands of the State and to preserve his own artistic expressivity.

There are three basic features that are present in the film retrieved and contributed from the both contesting art forms, which share the commonplace of the epic genre. The firsthand presence of socialist realism reads in 'how it should be' the unity of Russian people facing the common enemy, and their eagerness to sacrifice their own lives for the sake of the bright future of the motherland. However, the accelerated progression of the choreographed actions during the *veche* scenes, that narrate of the merger of people of Pskov and of Novgorod, introduces the avant-gardist understanding of subversive time, that the future is not the event you wait for, but is already here and now¹². The scenes of the towns' gatherings complicate the spectator's perception of time as fragmented and accelerated by delivering the synchronicity of movements, sounds, and actions in capturing of the burning torches in the hands of agitated participants, sounds of bells, and of heroic slogans.

Another instance, when socialist realism manages to claim its presence in the film is through the towering appearance of Alexander Nevsky, who functions here as a unifying ideological midpoint for the Russian nation. And indeed, Prince Alexander enters the featured scenes as tall and grand, walking and a talking statue. His silhouette fused from behind with three-point lighting and shot with a low angle. This allows him to dominate every frame he is assigned to. Furthermore, Prince Alexander's closing phrase towards the end of the film — «[...] не простила бы Русь, нам маломужества / [...] not would have forgiven you, Rus' for the lack of masculinity»¹³ — reflects the author's awareness about the didactical purpose of the film. This phrase with a leading noun *malomuzhestvo*, which is lost in translation from Russian into English, meaning literally 'lack of masculinity' suggests that in this fictional universe of Eisenstein, in the mythical kingdom of Alexander Nevsky, there is insecurity about not having sufficient masculinity because and an expectation of inevitable punishment for this conscious sense of anxiety¹⁴. However, the film features sub-stories of heroism and sacrifice committed on behalf of women, and therefore, the case of *malomuzhestvo* is apparent, and to a certain degree discredits the establishing assertion of the leader and himself. Here, by shifting and disbursing

¹² Cf. the issue *Visual Culture*, «Studies in Slavic Cultures», I, 2016, <http://www.pitt.edu/~slavic/sisc/SISC1/>.

¹³ *Alexander Nevsky*, cit., 1:37.

¹⁴ The complete translation of this uttering is «[...] Mother Rus' would have never forgiven you this lack of masculinity» (1:34), in the closing scene, Alexander Nevsky makes this statement in his address to the masses following up the victorious battles over Teutonic Knights.

the highlight from Alexander to people, Eisenstein gives way to avant-garde art, the rebellion against any categories and hierarchies¹⁵.

Thirdly, the Socialist-realist logic is about promoting the socialist ideals and depicting idyll pictures of the brotherhood of the ethnically diverse Soviet people under the care of one big brother, the ethnic Russian. In the film, we do see the relatively diverse people under the domineering presence of Prince Alexander. For example, one of the opening scenes features Prince Alexander's conversation with the connoisseur of Mongols, who reveals his admiration for Alexander. The camera angle captures the stoic and stable tall posture of Prince Alexander in synchronicity of the minimalist and lined, horizontally stretched background: a line in the horizon of the sky, a layer of the stretch of the river, and the shore. The clarity and austerity of the frame that captures Alexander here is in contrast with flowing opaque and smooth-edged representation of the Mongolian connoisseur. This diplomat from of the Golden Horde somehow fails to impose militarist or physical threat of the Mongolian enemy to Russia. But he imposes a threat of the sexual covert character and a threat of seduction. The connoisseur although discussing the matters of politics like a seasoned geisha flirts with Alexander playing with folders of his silk kimono, and pays him a certain degree of flattery. The conversation ends by the Mongol subject coquettishly offers Prince Alexander employment on the premises of Orda. This interaction during one of the opening scenes sets a tone of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque framing to the film, a sense that everything in the world of this film is slightly off the balance or a straight line, and boundaries and categories are being undermined and crossed. This one of the first establishing of the historical time frame for the film narrative right away overturns the official life and provides an avenue for a smirk, or even if to use Bakhtin's words for «a festive laughter»:

Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people. Second, it is universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone, including carnival's participants. The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity. Third, this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives. Such is the laughter of carnival¹⁶.

And retrospectively, Eisenstein employs the medieval satire to negotiate the terms between then required genres of his production: the medieval epic and a socialist realist historical drama with the reminders of Bolshevik manifestos and 'agidkas' - short visual slogan-ads with the ideological message fused with the urges to assertive actions in the spirit of the Russian Revolution.

The avant-gardists were also invested in ethnic categories. They held interest for the aboriginal cultures, but not for the political, social purposes and interests, but only to look for the raw, uncivilized, representation of emotion, gesture, and

¹⁵ K. Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*, Chicago 1981, p. 67.

¹⁶ M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Minneapolis-London 1984, p. 126

movement to imitate and to receive inspiration and be influenced. Eisenstein likewise appropriates expressivity of biomorphism, the ability to morph of one subject with another and represent that essence, whether it an animal, a rock, and or cathedrals cupolas. He notices this phenomenon of plasmaticness earlier on, in actors of Kabuki theater, in their ability to shift between categories of gender and visual expressivity, and later on in Disney's animation, as well as in the Brazilian Indian tribe of Bororo Parrot Men¹⁷. He bases this concept on the Greek myth, the myth of Proteus, the son of Poseidon, god of the sea, who has the ability to change his shape at will. In *Alexander Nevsky*, the quality of plasmaticness provides his characters not only with the visual ability to morph and change shape, but also with the mobility to function in between, and to answer to two ideological agendas, existent in the fictional universe of *Alexander Nevsky*.

The retrieving of the three main features allusive to the presence of Socialist realism in this Eisenstein's sound film and positioning them against the experimental logic of artist's digressions confirms the unique arrangement of the film. Furthermore, Sergei Eisenstein's films and his conceptual essays, as well as numerous semi-biographical accounts on Eisenstein's life and work, are strongly suggestive of the artist's preference for independently functioning and floating limbs, not the articulate and emotionally responsive human characters. However, in his historical drama, *Alexander Nevsky* (1938), regardless of their marginal position and the scarcity of their appearances within visual narrative of sequential shots, his human characters guard and reaffirm the boundaries of the two ideological agendas: of the artist himself, and the authoritative office of the Soviet cinematography under Stalin. Men and women, in this Eisenstein production, happen to be *makers of meaning* who address both socialist realist (imposed on the artist) agenda and Eisenstein's own, formalist aesthetics of *intellektual'noe kino* (experimental cinema) and his appropriated concept of plasmaticness.

Additionally, it is necessary to note here that this ethereal quality of plasmaticness is due to Eisenstein's collaborative work with the skillful cameraman Tisse. According to the row of critics, such as Cavendish, Mraz, O'Mahoney Eisenstein greatly appreciated Tisse's ability to uncover the whole story in tiny small touches, and by adjusting just slightly angles of the camera. In his seminal work *Montage* (1937), Eisenstein appraises Tolstoy's technique of equipping

¹⁷ At the All-Union Conference of Workers in Soviet Cinematography in January 1935, Sergei Eisenstein amazed the gathered professionals of Soviet cinematography by explaining to them that the most modern discoveries of cinema had their roots deep in 'primitive' ways of thinking about the world. The Soviet actor was to be understood as the descendant of the Bororo parrot men, who «claim that they, although people, are at the same time a particular species of red parrot, common to Brazil». That was not all: «the power of cinematic metaphor, Eisenstein declared, derived from the same force underlying the Polynesian tradition of throwing open all doors when a woman was giving birth... were modern Soviet artists really supposed to learn their trade from 'primitive' man?». È Zil'ver, *Za Bol'shoe Kinoiskusstvo*, Moskva 1935, p. 40.

insignificant details with special functions to trigger the reader's response on a metacognitive level. Eisenstein shares:

[...] и ко всему этом косость глаз,- страшный, гениально обдуманый Толстым штрих, где сочетается мотив «зазывательности» и в то же время «безнаказанности» для того, кто соблазнит Катюшу, потому что косою, не фиксируемый взгляд как бы понижает чувство вашей ответственности «лицом к лицу» с таким человеком, как бы уводит от прямого столкновения с ним

[...] and in addition to this, there is a slight misalignment of one of Katiusha's eyes - is the horrifying, genius, well thought- through Tolstoyan touch, in which one reads the motif of "come over and play with me" and "impunity" – a sign for the next seducer of Katiusha since this type of eye prevents a face to face confrontation and reduces the sense of guilt and responsibility¹⁸.

For example, the indirect angle of Olga's presence confirms her "otherness" as if it indicates to spectators that she is on a mission, following the orders of another omnipresent deity. This angle also is suggestive of the existing anomaly that clandestinely operates within the same frame of the story, and warns about the instability of the existent categories and brings back the notion of being stuck in between and the overwhelming need to escape.

Since the film features the epic genre, which Bakhtin defines it as the realm of closedness and perfectedness, it makes a perfect stage for the artist's experiment with plasmaticness¹⁹. Exactly closedness and perfectedness of the epic genre also is identifiable in the feature composition that makes *Alexander Nevskiy* special; which is a symbiosis of image and sound/music. Closedness and perfectedness also can be read as the main qualities of the main characters, Alexander, Gavriilo, Vasilii, Vasilisa and Olga. For Socialist-realism the interaction with the past through appreciation of the epic genre fits the ideological agenda of creating narratives about the bright future overlooking onto the glorious past. For avant-garde aesthetics, this genre works because it represents a raw form of the narrative that can be reworked in an interrogation of temporality and by pushing towards progressive form. And indeed, Eisenstein here creates an experiment with the Russian medieval heroic past against the Soviet present with one villain in charge. Eisenstein uses in the film the crude sounds of the shepherd horns, robust naiveté of the Russian spirit, and folk oral tradition to retell the story of the Alexander Nevsky's genius maneuver, which involves a communal effort and the laws of physics, of gravity and of the centrifugal force.

In sum, as this paper demonstrates, the medieval crude joke and the medium of plasmaticness helped Eisenstein to balance formalist aesthetics and the rigidity of Socialist realist canons and to give the female gender a new place

¹⁸ S. Eisenstein, С.Эйзенштейн. Избранные произведения, cit., t. 2 pp. 329-484, in English translation, *Collection of Essays*, cit., vol. 2, pp. 329-484.

¹⁹ K. Clark and M. Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, Cambridge 1984, p. 274.

in the history of Soviet cinema. Closer scrutiny of the unsettling piece of folk wisdom, *The Hare and the Vixen* in the film, pointed towards the historical background and unsettled disposition of Sergei Eisenstein imposed on him by the project. This folktale features crudeness and physiology-based shaming, as Bakhtin's carnival laughter reveals the truths about the film's system and the permeability of social categories. The tongue-in-cheek effect about this tale inside a tale is suggestive of aesthetic dissonance in the established order of the story. The pattern asks for a perverse pathological quest of the repeated scheme that this story presents: an uncomfortable position of stuck-in-between, and the desire to escape it. The artistic solution to which is found in absent, but central women, which are absent in meaning, but central as a working device.

Here the camera's eye is focused on the ruined backdrop of Pskov and the puzzling alien presence of the German occupiers. This profane arrangement of futuristic extraterrestrial looking Germans on the setting of medieval Pskov, although discomfiting and surreal, confounds the audience's emotional response within the frame of moral judgment. Only the expressions of pain and awe on the faces of the women in the crowd allow the spectator to process this event as horrific and perverse. Furthermore, the conception of the sorrow about Mother Rus' loss is delivered to the spectator through a female singing, confirming that women here are identified with the Russian soil, and that they are the soul of the nation.

In one of the last closing scenes in the film, the one after the epic battle, there is a poignant landscape with the dismembered bodies of Russian soldiers scattered on the shore, almost indistinguishable from the homogeneous gray glistening landscape with its melding of snow, soil, dusky sky, and the fallen. The scene represents another sample work of the vertical montage that created an illusion of the dying men being elevated up to the sky, following their own howls: 'Maria...', which echoes back other names: 'Izyaslavna...', 'Nastasiya...'. This composition is filled with the solemnity of dying men facing the glorious death, on their way to becoming heroes, being remembered as heroes, fitting the canons of Socialist realism²⁰. However, their clinging to the names of women during their final minutes keeps them from dying.

Women increase in number and in a versatility of looks only during the celebration scene where they are greeting Prince Alexander. But other than that, throughout the course of the film, they seem invisible in their heavily draped triangular shaped overcoats topped with cupola-like hats. They appear to be a continuation of the city cathedrals and city halls. This representation of women may be interpreted within dual terms with the appreciation of both: of socialist realist agenda with the absence of women during times of war, and of Eisenstein's plasticity.

For example, Olga of Novgorod enters into the story's framework accompanied by the knelling sound of a church bell in the background. She

²⁰ See K. Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*, Bloomington 2000, pp. 5-9, 255.

walks along the shoreline, framed by the bridge's perils and a waving white flag hanging from the mast of a docked boat. The opaque landscape that features a shoreline in the interplay of white and gray shadows matches Olga's silhouette, her amorphous composure. For the first four to five seconds, the spectator is unable to see her face, because her face is dynamically averted, following a strange mechanical tempo. As if she is from another dimension, Olga is trying to understand where she is, and where she needs to go. The waving white fabric behind her and the peril of the wooden bridge visually staged her movements and opaque presence. It pulls the spectator in and anticipates her performance, her story. She stops, faces the eye of the camera and the eyes of her suitors, Buslai and Gavriilo, smiles ever so slightly and leaning back, holds onto the peril of the bridge, as if she is about to sing. Now the spectator clearly sees her facial features with her long braids and earrings, no longer simply an amorphous shape.

Olga is delivered to the eye of the spectator by the eyes of Buslai and Gavriilo, who were standing on the elevated pathway by the gates of Novgorod as if guarding the shoreline, trying to spot foreign intruders. However, they spot not a stranger, but Olga. Her siren-like movements and position by the bridge lures them to her. Mesmerized, they follow her to the market square, where she shops for fabric. This activity confirms her femininity, whereas when in one of the opening scenes Alexander Nevsky touches the cloth and changes his clothes to greet his guests, threatens his masculinity.

At the crowded square, they almost lose sight of her, but then catch up with her, approaching from both sides, extending her their proposals of marriage. Here Olga remains true to her assigned gender. She represents a trophy, a reward to the braver of the two: Vasilyi Buslai or Gavriilo Oleksich. But the sense of Olga's otherworldliness or even anomaly comes back as soon as she engages Buslai and Gavriilo in conversation.

She hardly engages in direct conversation or eye contact with any of them. In fact, the only man in the film she faces, addresses and eventually bows to is Prince Alexander, (who represents the symbolic and 'the real' father of the nation). Other than that, her face is always looking back at a slight angle directly toward the camera, an angle suggestive of a certain digressive cognition, as if to take in Eisenstein's creative logic and appreciation of the details and geometric technicality of positioning objects.

For example, for the uninvolved reader, the other female, Vasilisa appears to be the projection continuation of Olga, her visual twin. They stand in fact on the grounds of the city of Pereyaslavl looking remarkably similar, only Vasilisa is slightly taller²¹. The camera is focused on them, zooming angle up, and frames them into the interplay between flame and darkness, providing a visual illusion of them being in the center of events and above the crowd surrounding them. Their morphing homogenous appearance of geometrical triangular-shaped figures creates a puzzling effect for spectators akin to the productive/reproductive

²¹ *Alexander Nevsky*, cit., 40:28.

matryoshka dolls. With these nesting dolls, every doll in the set looks alike, differing only in size, with smaller dolls successively resting inside larger dolls. The mechanism, of which, refer to the emptiness and absence when the dolls are separate. In that state, the unassembled dolls represent infertile shells and serve as reminders of the death and the loss. This evokes frustration and uncertainty in the spectator and even the uncanny feeling of being deprived of any sense of control.

It causes the spectator to perceive the two chapters in the film as a mechanical acceleration of the events: Novgorod gets burnt, citizens are captured, men disappear, and the girl turns into a warrior, leaving the impression that there is only one active female character during the progression of the story. In fact, this point in the film in the 48th minute is central to the story. This is when the citizens of all three cities gather under one leader and their movements in the excitement of preparation accelerate the film's sequence closer to the main event: the battle on the ice. And this is the hook of the Soviet experimental film, *intellektualnoe kino*, which is designed to instigate the intellectual and weighted involvement of the spectator and consideration of the projected subject's twofold matter: image and idea.

Olga has a role of being a maiden of Novgorod and the desired trophy for Buslai and Gavriilo for their achievements on the battlefield. Olga appears to be immune to the romantic advances of Buslai and Gavriilo. In fact, when they do approach her, she says: «[...] Простите, люди добрые, не знаю о чём речь ведёте / [...] Please forgive me, kind people, I have no idea what you are talking about»²². Olga's disconnect from surrounding realities, which can be read from her inability to engage in direct communication with others, once again establishes her as an autonomous abstract body. Her inability to engage in a dialogic conversation and to read a degree of romance and desire into the marriage proposal reveal her Snow Maiden like rigidity. Bakhtin, in his essay *The Dialogic Imagination*, attributes to small chat and laughter erotic connotations, imitative of psycho-physiological interactions²³. Her opaque otherworldly presence disrupts the healthy productive scheme of socialist realism with its demands for a clear vernacular, and an active input into the process of production/reproduction.

It confirms her qualities of plasmaticness and reveals that she is performing her gender role in Butlerian terms²⁴. One detects the same disconnect in the behavioral patterns of Vasilisa, she performs a drag, whereas Olga does gender. According to Butler, when a drag is employed, there is a disconnect from the biological sex and the projection of the fantasy of the desired gender. As she puts it: «when a man is dressed as a woman, we recognize the first part as the real, and the second part as a fantasy, illusory projection»²⁵. She is assigned to perform

²² *Ibid.*, 16:14.

²³ M. Bakhtin and M. Holquist, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, Austin 1981, p. 236.

²⁴ J. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York 1990, p. xi.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

socialist realist ideologies of the meek, barely visible, and self-sacrificial maiden. At the same time, the artist employs her character to symbolically negotiate his vision and captures her in the conceptual cocoon of plasmaticness. Thus, she functions as an artistic device disconnected from her pre-assigned gender role.

The camera focuses primarily on Vasilisa's face and head, cutting off the rest of her body. The effect of zooming in provides a fictional portrayal of her as a giant. Her facial features are framed within the gleam of her helmet, adding to an uncanny effect of her fantastic presence. She emerges from the tight space of the camera frame as the castrating and punishing primordial mother. Her head, in the shape of a cathedral dome, dressed in a helmet, is a reminder of a phallic presence, of its possible loss and/or gain. Since Vasilisa has already been granted a sword, a symbolic representation of the phallic power – earlier the armorer Ignat gives her a sword with the following words: «Без прибора и вши не забьешь! / Without a tool, you wouldn't be able to get even a louse!» – she threatens and punishes the spectator by looking back. This creates a reading opposite to Mulvey's empowerment of the spectator. Mulvey states that the gaze of the spectator is the one that penetrates the female body. Under this gaze, the female body turns into an object to explore and to «demystify her mystery» as «a reenactment of trauma», since it is a reminder of lack, of the threat of castration²⁶. But here, against the trend of commercial cinema, Eisenstein's formalist approach in his empowering vision of the artistic dominance creates a haunting image of his heroine. This anomalous representation of Vasilisa brings the spectator back to the first scene when we encounter a helmet on a skull that resembles Vasilisa's suggesting an alternative interpretation of the film. The repeated accentuation of Vasilisa's head and face throughout the battle scenes in the film creates an uncomfortable recognition of loss: emasculation or death. Vasilisa represents a double anomaly as a female performing a drag and a female returning the gaze.

Although her prescribed role conforms to the socialist realist canon by being a self-sacrificial daughter, and a citizen that is taking a risk for the sake of the motherland, taming nature, and striving for heroism, the meaning that Eisenstein endorses upon her with the camera work makes her anomalous for 'commercial' cinema. This meaning enclosed in Vasilisa's portrayal and in her gentler double, Olga, is the reminder of a fluctuation of artistic thought and an awareness of the mismatch that is going hand-in-hand with the formalist perception of thinking in images: a creation of art takes place between the image and the idea²⁷.

Furthermore, the duality of the two maidens, their conforming side and the uncanny one contribute to this concept. It is Eisenstein's method of plasmaticness and a compliance of the spectator to art that provides women with

²⁶ L. Braudy and M. Cohen, *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, New York 1999, p. 840.

^{27A} Nesbet, *Savage Junctures: Sergei Eisenstein and the Shape of Thinking*, London 2003, pp. 4-11.

the new roles. Vasilisa, together with her double (Olga), is presented as a Jungian archetypal reminder of the possible threat that brings us back to the image of the skull topped with a helmet²⁸. This skull, in my interpretation, receives a vision of the alternative end of the story, or a subconscious awareness of the artist that if he were to deliver minimally socialist realist heroism and optimism he would eventually be facing artistic perishability.

Olga and Vasilisa's perception as saboteurs of the existing order and the creation of space to escape and digress, uncover the presence of Eisenstein's own aesthetics and his rebellious drive against the rigidity of the socialist realist order. Certain personal notes about the work on *Alexander Nevsky*, as the one below, reveal, although indirectly, his emotional unrest about beginning work on *Alexander Nevsky*: «[...] Впереди либо паноптикум восковых фигур, либо малоискусное стилизаторство» / [...] Ahead what awaits (me) is either a panoptical presentation of wax mannequins or a low-grade cover-up» (the translation is mine)²⁹. This note indicates Eisenstein's hesitance and pessimism about the assigned project. He was afraid that working under constant scrutiny and control would turn his creative work into a trivial farce. Regardless of this bleak attitude, in the beginning, *Alexander Nevsky* turned out to be a highly acclaimed film, appraised for its robust patriotic spirit, artistic expressivity and a successful interpretive delivery of a medieval setting.

Natalya Khokholova

✉ khokholova_n@auca.kg

²⁸J. Campbell, *JUNG the Portable Jung*, New York 1971, pp. 48-69.

²⁹S. Eisenstein, *Izbrannye Proizvedeniya v Shesti Tomakh*, Moskva 1964, pp. 159-167.