

Sergei Eisenstein, a man of books

Ada ACKERMAN

ABSTRACT

The creator of images that “shook the world,” the Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein was first and foremost a man of books. The study of his library, its material aspects included, paves the way for a reevaluation of his work in light of his reading, and reveals his inclusion within international artistic and intellectual networks.



« I could steal books. I could possibly even kill for books. »

Sergei Eisenstein, *Beyond the Stars: The Memoirs of Sergei Eisenstein*

Due to the encyclopedic nature of his knowledge, which is reflected in most of the texts he wrote—both theoretical and autobiographical—the Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein (1898-1948) has often been called the “Russian Leonardo da Vinci.” Like the great Renaissance master, Eisenstein stands out through his insatiable desire for knowledge as well as his intense curiosity in the most diverse fields: both translated into and were personified by his relation to books, one that was as passionate as it was essential and existential. Eisenstein was a fervent reader and determined collector of books throughout his life, such that the moving images that established his fame grew out of a textual and iconographic reservoir, whose study can shed light on the origins of Eisenstein’s thought and work, as well as help to better appreciate its polysemous and complex nature.

A partially preserved material library

The study of Eisenstein’s books is fortunately made possible by the comparison of multiple sources. The first of these is his material library, which was partly preserved and conserved until March 2018 at the Eisenstein Museum in Smolenskaya Street in Moscow, in the apartment of the filmmaker’s widow Pera Atasheva (1900-1965). Eisenstein’s study was later dismantled, and his collections are now in the crates and reserves of the State Central Film Museum in Moscow, where most of them remain inaccessible for now. Some books that belonged to Eisenstein are also conserved at the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art, which possesses the most important collection relating to the artist. Others were unfortunately added to the collection of the National Library of Russia without being inventoried, such that barring a miraculous exception, their trace has been lost. Finally, a considerable number of books were stolen during Atasheva’s lifetime, who suffered from gradual loss of vision.

The materiality and arrangement of the collection from Eisenstein’s study, which was fortunately studied before being dismantled, were crucial. Using photographs of Eisenstein’s original apartment located in Chistyye Prudy, Atasheva partially reconstructed the shelves of his library by recreating the order in which he arranged his books, which followed a layout based on the principle of montage so dear to the filmmaker. For example, books on the spiritual exercises of Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556) were placed next to works focusing on the game “system” of Konstantin Stanislavski (1868-1938), with Eisenstein believing that numerous similarities united them as “psychotechnics,” such as the importance ascribed to the stimulation of the five senses and the imagination. The order of Eisenstein’s books thus fleshes out his association of ideas among different authors and systems of thought, thereby reflecting one way of organizing, orchestrating, and conceiving knowledge. This structuring of knowledge through montage is also present in his writings, in which Eisenstein combines quotations from highly disparate sources that sometimes contradict one another. The library thus becomes the mirror of a world view, with Eisenstein describing his library in *Beyond the Stars* as an external brain, an extension of his own brain with which he could converse, as though nerve endings connected the pages of his books to the cells of his body: “Currents flow from the small cells of grey matter of the brain, through the cranium and the sides of bookcases and into the hearts of the books.”

On a number of occasions in *Beyond the Stars*, Eisenstein recounts a phenomenon that can be called “bibliomancy,” with the books presenting themselves to him, as though they sought him out to provide a thought or a quotation appropriate for the thought he was developing at that moment.

In addition to the often surprising associations between different works that this library included, it also stood out through its variety and eclecticism: French and English slang, classical architecture, Japanese theater, Mexican popular culture, esotericism, anthropology, psychology, medieval mysteries, etc.

Books, traces, and the materialization of artistic and intellectual networks

Eisenstein had the invaluable habit of systematically marking the date and place of acquisition in each of his

books, such that we can reconstruct and partially follow his intellectual development through his books, as well as establish a geography of his knowledge. These are accompanied by the frequent dedications authors made to the filmmaker, which situate Eisenstein in different networks and circles, and help to better appreciate his friendships and affinities. For example, the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art includes a copy of *Kiki's Memoirs* (Kiki de Montparnasse, 1901-1953), dedicated as follows in reference to the *Battleship Potemkin*: "To M. Eisenstein, whom I find very agreeable, for I also like big ships and sailors." Giving books not only intensified and provided concrete form to the pleasure of meeting one another, but also served later as a medium for pursuing an intellectual and friendly relation, a medium that Eisenstein especially enjoyed upon returning to the USSR from Mexico and the United States in 1932, when he was no longer allowed to leave the country. Books therefore became a substitute for travel, and enabled him to maintain ties with the exterior. This can be seen in the letter Eisenstein sent on February 1, 1937 to his American friend Jay Leyda (1910-1988), amid incredibly difficult times: "Could you keep me *au courant* about what is happening in the fields I am interested in? Maybe it wouldn't be too difficult for you to occasionally send me the Times book reviews, so that I know what is being published in your country." Books allowed for evasion, but also preserved the memory of past trips and friendships made abroad.

Eisenstein's books are also highly instructive because regardless of how much he cherished books, he did not hesitate to annotate them frenetically, to include dialogues with authors or his own reflections based on the material he had read. His copies of Charles Darwin (1809-1882), Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857-1939), and Vincent Van Gogh (1853-1890) are just a few of the volumes peppered with marginalia, bookmarks, inserts, and loose leaves covered in notes and reflections. These fascinating materials make it possible to observe his thought as it was developing, and to measure the contribution of a particular author to Eisenstein's theoretical and artistic system. This information should be considered with other documents that flesh out our understanding of his reading and practice as a collector: his archives include registers and bills providing information about his book purchases from a very young age, as does his correspondence with friends across the globe, who were asked to inform him about recent publications in their respective countries, and to send him those publications that drew his interest. We are familiar with his mental library through his many notebooks conserved at the archives, which are full of bibliographical references, notes, and quotations.

These different sources provide us access to the world of his books, and help us grasp the importance they held in his life and thought, thereby opening up a new perspective on his work: the portrait of the filmmaker as reader that emerges from these works highlights the strongly interdisciplinary, transhistoric, intertextual, and international dimension of Eisenstein's work. What clearly emerges is his belonging not just to Russian and Soviet intellectual, artistic, and cultural networks, but to international ones as well (Europe, America, Asia): Eisenstein had ties with figures as different as the architect Le Corbusier, the writer Blaise Cendrars, the linguist Nikolaï Marr, and the anthropologist Anita Brenner. This is strongly reflected in the dedication Brenner included in her book *Idols Behind Altars*, which was crucial for Eisenstein both in his discovery of Mexico and in filming *¡Que Viva Mexico!*: "This book about great artists was written for great artists like S. M. Eisenstein to whom it is inscribed." Books subsequently materialize the dynamics of exchanges, circulations, and transfers of knowledge, of texts and images that were absolutely central and integral to Eisenstein's work.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

ACKERMAN, Ada, "Le cabinet Eisenstein, reconstitution d'une genèse intellectuelle," in Françoise Levallant, Dario Gamboni, Jean-Roch Bouiller (eds.), *Bibliothèques d'artistes, xx^e-xxi^e siècles* (Paris: Presses universitaires de Paris-Sorbonne, Paris, 2010), 323-346.

EISENSTEIN, Sergei, *Beyond the Stars: The Memoirs of Sergei Eisenstein* (London: BFI Publishing, 1995).

RUMIANTSEVA, Vera, *V Dome Mastera. Mir Sergueïa Eïzenchteïna* (In the Master's House: Sergei Eisenstein's World) (Moscow: Bely Gorod, 2018).

Source URL:

<https://ehne.fr/encyclopedia/themes/arts-in-europe/collection-european-images/sergei-eisenstein-a-man-books>