

Eisenstein the Terrible

Erotic drawings. Sergei Eisenstein (Riga, 1898-Moscow, 1948)

I'm intoxicated by the dry asceticism of graphic art, the precision of drawing [...] It must emerge from the images of cords used to bind up the bodies of martyrs, from the marks left by the blow of the whip on the white surface of the body, from the whistling blade of the sword before it touches the neck of the condemned...
"Encounter with Mexico"
in *Immoral Memories*

Erotic Drawings by Sergei Eisenstein—key figure of the Russian, later Soviet, avant-garde—can be seen as an artistic experience in which the limitless fantasies of an intimate and irreducible universe have touched down on earth. The work is set amidst the convulsive era of the Bolshevik rise to power and comprises explorations of sexuality and its immense impact on individual consciousness. An area of personal inquiry, these drawings are charged with psychological connotations which invariably harbor a certain amazement with regard to human nature. Often generated in the form of notes, the drawings are typified by explicit images containing scenes of necrophilia, homosexuality, zoophilia, group sex, and dismemberment. These are works with tremendous morphological richness that trepan all tranquility and complacency with their violent aura.

Revolutions have never had sex as one of their core tenants. Neither the Jacobins nor the Restorationists have seen sexuality as key to political imagination. For decades, Eisenstein's erotic drawings were on the fringes of museums and galleries, inserted into a world not only alien to the dominant *ratio* of the public sphere, but also from the mere notion of culture. It is likely that we are at the encounter of the sexual circus that was just beginning to take shape when the eleven-year-old Sergei went to his first circus performance with his beloved nanny. Amidst the eccentric cast of artists, he discovers acrobatic clowns, whose bodily unfurling and ductility will later give rise to echoes that will illuminate his artistic horizon. If we pay credence to the Freudian design that

infancy is destiny, these episodes from Eisenstein's youth cannot be overlooked; Maxim Shtraukh, with whom he shared lifelong adventures, wrote in 1910:

“I was seven or eight-years old [...] I remember sand dunes and pine forests along the coast of Riga, the coastal road which was flanked by vacation homes, where people rented rooms for the summer. In the garden of one such house you could often see a young boy of some ten years old, with very short hair, bent over a thick book of drawings. His hand, quick and sure of itself, produced fantastic drawings [...] Drawing was his favorite pastime and his notebooks were full of sketches...We saw one another over the course of several years and gradually became friends.”

The drawings share a diverse genetic and conceptual origin; with little or nothing to do with the elegant and aseptic eroticism favorably authorized by the classical tribunes. Together with the circus as inspiration, the drawings evince an undoubtable proximity to the graffiti of public bathrooms or with works associated with folk or *lesser arts* of the past, in large part comprised of anonymous creations. They form part of the constructivist feast of the *music hall* and its choreographies; the biomechanics propelled by Vsevolod Meyerhold, resolute opponent of Socialist Realism (executed by firing squad on Joseph Stalin's orders in 1940), who opened the door to Eisenstein's entrée into the dramatic arts and reinforced the central and immanent idea of the body in the *physis* of representation. We also see elements of Freudian psychoanalysis and orientalism, emerging from his studies on Japan: the graphical symbols of the ideograms and the canonical set design of Kabuki theater. The drawings once again unravel, deafly, the eternal battle between art, politics, and society, while simultaneously sketching the infinite re-playing of thought and sexual inventiveness.

A fundamental objective of these drawings is to make explicit the shameless rituality that is the undercurrent of sexuality—beginning with notable formal strategies ranging from meticulous single line drawings to ones made with the celerity of the eraser or the sketch, where lines of varying thickness multiply and alternate, acquiring, in both cases, uncanny creases. Drawn on all kinds of paper, including sheets with hotel or inn headings, these sketches rebel against any kind of realist reference and form a thematic bridge spanning from biblical and Greco-Latin sagas to pre-Hispanic mythologies.

It is said that this all began with an early childhood memory Freud attributes to Leonardo da Vinci, as extracted by Eisenstein in *The Psychology of Art*: “It seemed to me that while I was in my cradle, a dovetail [a kind of falcon] descended on top of me,

opened my mouth with its tail and pecked at me various times between the lips.” This image, charged with pain and pleasure, had a transcendental impact on Eisenstein, who theoretically pursued the latent content of this scene, a testament to the sexual impulse that the psychoanalytic web, like many other things, never fully revealed, but in the child’s mind fomented unfoldings and mysteries.

Sergei Eisenstein arrived to the Americas at the dawn of the thirties, rather overwhelmed by the revolution that had been put in place, at the precise moment when the Soviet Union’s major avant-garde movements were beleaguered by a political agenda that saw art as a fundamentally useful medium for disseminating the propaganda of government ideologues, simplifications of the relationship between the masses and power. The tightening of cultural politics, with the rise of Stalin, ground down the artistic vertigo of a revolution that had originally conceived of art as a field for experimentation intended to disrupt the ideas of the classical tradition. Eisenstein arrives in Mexico in December of 1930, after seeing the failure of various projects in the United States. Not all that removed from touristic enthusiasm—the Soviet visitor referred to the Mexican territory as a Garden of Eden bound to the splendor of laziness—the country of the sun, its history, its enigmas, the revolutionary mythology, and its *primitivism*, exercise an enormous fascination for the young creator who, at twenty-six, had already made two foundational films of cinematographic language: *Strike* and *Battleship Potemkin*. His stay in post-revolutionary Mexico lasted a little over two years. A majority of the drawings will emerge as a result of this stay, —which will assume bucolic hues—a tremendous record constituting an open affirmation of pre-conceived notions, which had previously appeared in more veiled terms in his films or which would be integrated into later films by way of humorous or dramatic metaphors, juxtapositions, and ellipses.

The Mexican experience had begun in 1920, with the staging in the USSR of the theatrical adaptation of Jack London’s *The Mexican*, and later with Eisenstein’s personal contact with José Clemente Orozco and Diego Rivera. Quite disenchanted with the course the socialist turn had taken, Eisenstein arrives to Veracruz, in the company of photographer Eduard Tisse and editor Grigori Alexandrov, with the goal of commencing a film project that months later would be called *iQué viva México!*—the impossible film which he would never see through to completion. Eisenstein experiments with his talent as an illustrator on a large scale, something that will become a central activity for him by virtue of an intense daily practice. Having previously been a creator of revolutionary art and propaganda, in Mexico he audaciously, profusely, and freely opens his work to

sexuality, introducing an aspect of avant-garde art that had previously been unexplored. Just as Eisensteinian film will leave its mark on the enigma that is modernity, his erotic drawings will leave a tremendous imprint on the imaginary of contemporary art.

For the Latvian artist, these drawings represent artistic work that shakes free the rigidity of moral conservatism, work in which violence, profanation, sadism, and death, can be freely expressed; in which archetypes and mythological references emerge that allude to the duality between Eros and Thanatos, a duality that's artfully used to draw equivalency between religious trance and sexual ecstasy. Hence the blasphemous, erotically obsessed, and mystical nature of these drawings emerges, which in the words of Anita Brenner represent "a brusque eruption of the transversal line of bisexuality." But beyond that, they represent the continent of a multi-faceted constellation of images that have yet to lose the apex of their piercing strength, lying in the infinite folds of sex. In *eros* itself, Eisenstein discovers a sacrilegious and atemporal experience, much like the sense of universality running through all of art history. As if it were a kind of sentence, Bataille writes:

"The human spirit [...] goes constantly in fear of [it]self. [Its] erotic urges terrify [it] [...] I do not think that man has much chance of throwing light on the things that terrify him before he has dominated them. Not that he should hope for a world in which there would be no cause for fear, where eroticism and death would be on the level of a mechanical process. But man can surmount the things that frighten him and face them squarely."

If we look one by one at the essays-sketches-notes, we will find examples of a singular and untransferable artistic vision, by way of an interminable display of artistic possibilities capable of fully expressing the sexual imagination. But if we look at the drawings as a kind of mosaic, the drawings as a whole represent a declaration of principles or a profoundly imaginative manifesto about the human condition and desire, a *garden of delights*—which needs neither hell nor heaven, nor any theological warnings.

–Sergio Raúl Arroyo