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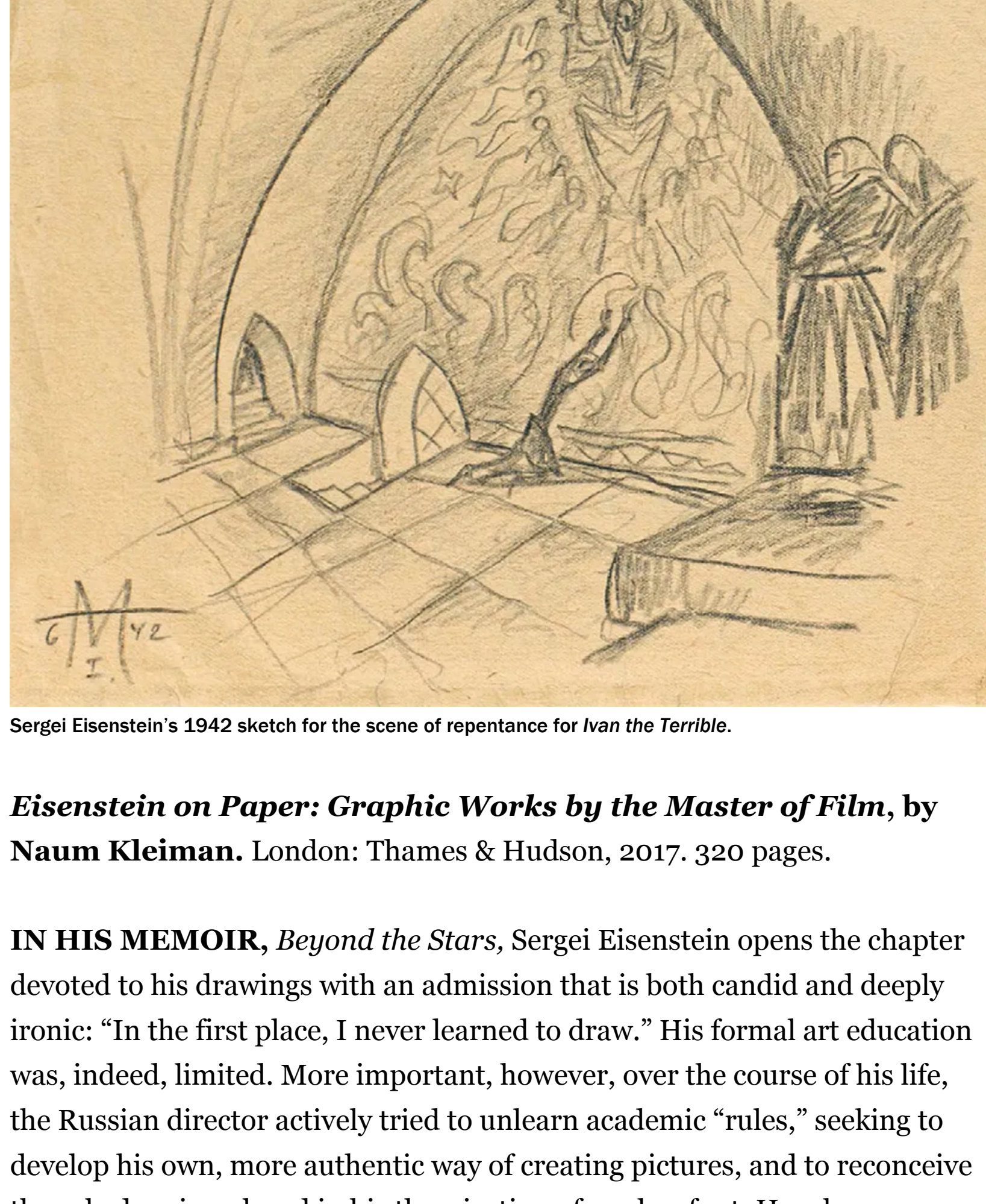
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BOOKS

NAUM KLEIMAN'S EISENSTEIN ON PAPER

By Stuart Liebman

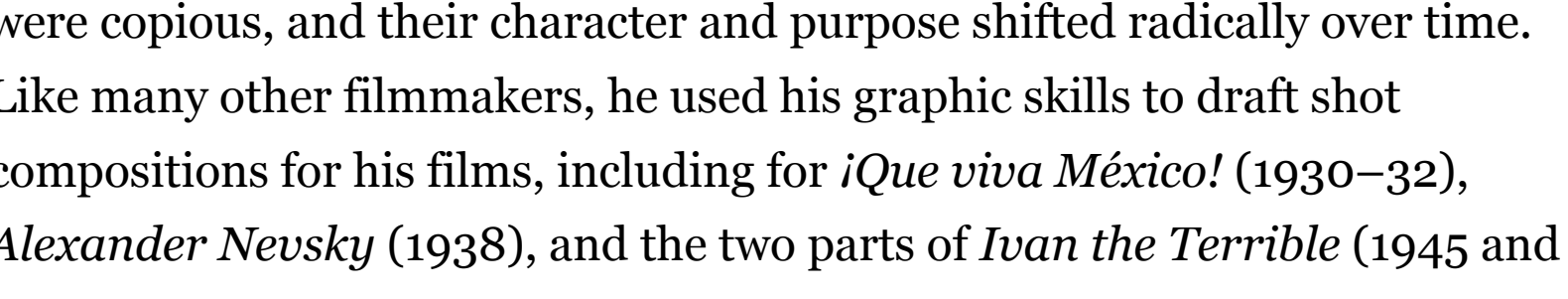
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Sergei Eisenstein's 1942 sketch for the scene of repentance for Ivan the Terrible.

Eisenstein on Paper: Graphic Works by the Master of Film, by Naum Kleiman. London: Thames & Hudson, 2017. 320 pages.

IN HIS MEMOIR, *Beyond the Stars*, Sergei Eisenstein opens the chapter devoted to his drawings with an admission that is both candid and deeply ironic: “In the first place, I never learned to draw.” His formal art education was, indeed, limited. More important, however, over the course of his life, the Russian director actively tried to unlearn academic “rules,” seeking to develop his own, more authentic way of creating pictures, and to reconceive the role drawing played in his theorization of works of art. How he succeeded is the subject of Naum Kleiman’s sumptuously illustrated and impressively argued book.



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An enthusiastic amateur draftsman since childhood, the director of *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) discovered in drawing a lifelong, if for many reasons private, passion. His forays into the medium were as varied as they were copious, and their character and purpose shifted radically over time. Like many other filmmakers, he used his graphic skills to draft shot compositions for his films, including for *iQue viva México!* (1930–32), *Alexander Nevsky* (1938), and the two parts of *Ivan the Terrible* (1945 and 1958, respectively). Some of these sketches ended up in the hands of his colleagues and friends, few of whom were fully aware of the volume and range of his productivity. Even within this intimate circle, only a handful comprehended the extent to which, since the early 1930s, he regarded graphic expression as an experimental technique to explore what he termed the “*Grundproblem*”: the question of how to reconcile primordial sensuality with forms of logic and artistic convention to produce “ex-stasis,” an almost mystical foundation for aesthetic experience. And almost no one realized that by the time he died in 1948, he had preserved more than five thousand pages that illuminated, often in puzzling or controversial ways, his better-known cinematic and theoretical achievements. Kleiman’s deeply informed and ambitiously detailed account reaches a clear conclusion: The images Eisenstein obsessively drew (mostly in black graphite with occasional accents in colored pencils) constitute, alongside his films and writings, a third major dimension of his three-decade-long artistic career.

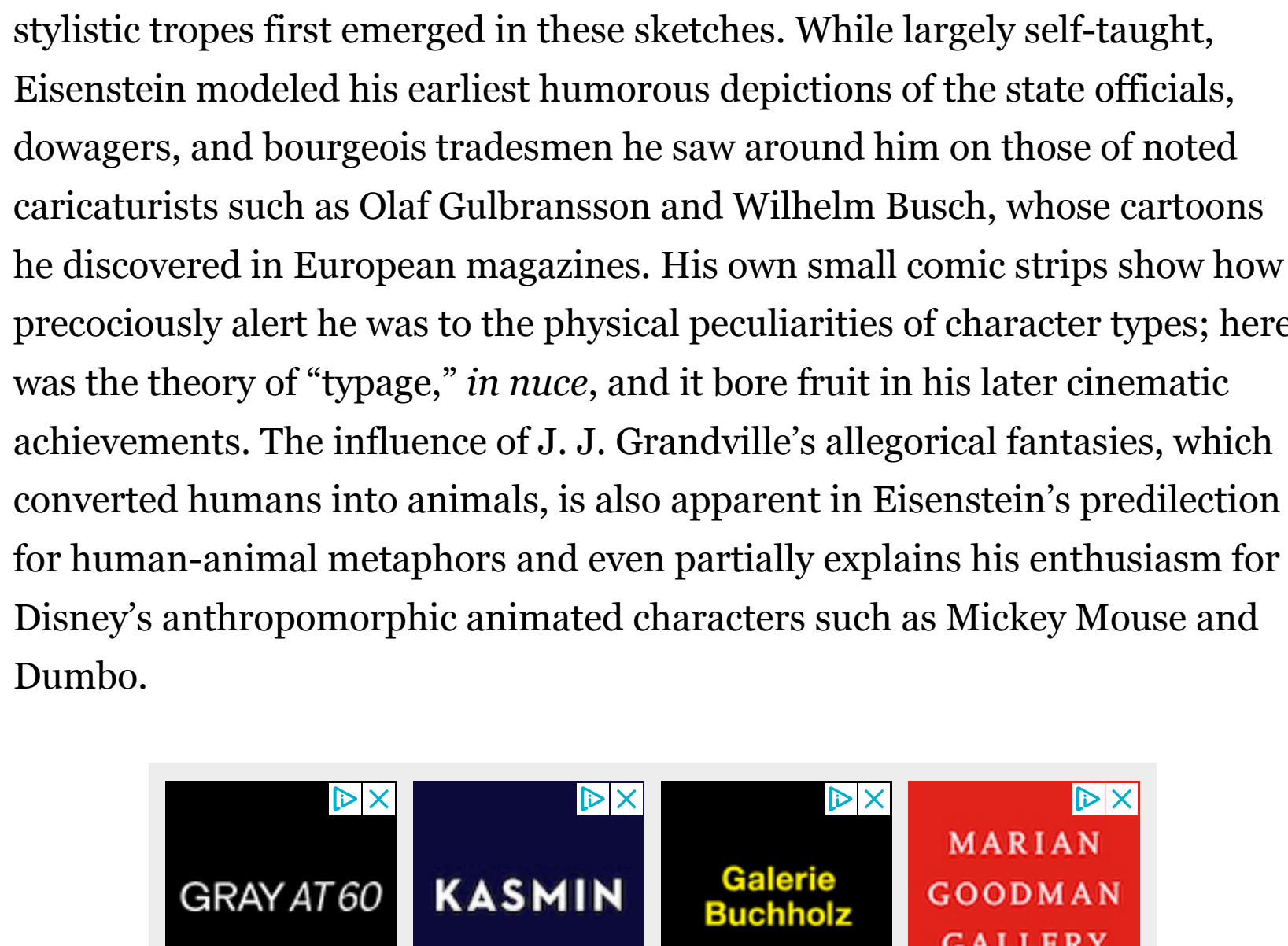


Sergei Eisenstein's character drawings for *Le million de Pierrot* (Pierrot's Million), 1917.

During his lifetime only a single, small exhibition of his work was ever mounted (organized by John Becker in New York in 1932). No outlet for his images' public display existed in the terrorized state that Russia had become in the '30s, and Stalin's banning of the second part of *Ivan the Terrible* in 1946, moreover, consigned Eisenstein's reputation to a kind of cultural limbo for a decade. Public recognition of the drawings therefore only became possible with the “Khrushchev Thaw” following Stalin's death in 1953. RGALI, the Russian State Archive of Literature and Arts, had accepted thousands of his drawings, along with unpublished writings and notes from his estate, and thanks to the tireless efforts of Pera Atasheva, Eisenstein's widow, the archive agreed to sponsor the first major exhibition of his graphic works in Moscow in 1957. A handsome volume containing more than two hundred of the drawings eventually appeared in 1961, and a small number of the images subsequently trickled into print in the West. After the fall of the USSR, however, the floodgates for this material opened wide. Over the past two decades, five books devoted to diverse aspects of his drawing practice have appeared in Mexico, France, and Russia, but these were never widely accessible in the United States and have long been out of print. US audiences have by and large only had an opportunity to see the small catalogue for the groundbreaking 1999 show, organized by Jean Gagnon, at the Daniel Langlois Foundation for Art, Science, and Technology in Montreal and the Drawing Center in New York. (This past January, eighty-four of these works were on view at Alexander Gray Associates in New York, but no catalogue accompanied the show.)

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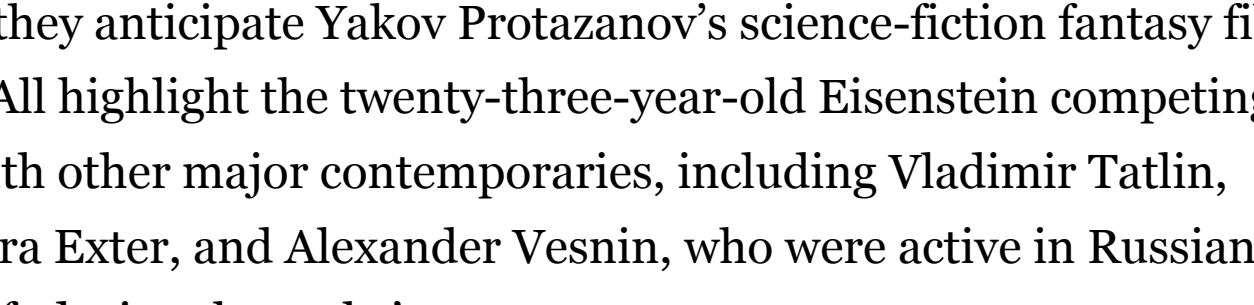
That is why Kleiman's *Eisenstein on Paper* is a cause for celebration. With few exceptions, the more than five hundred images and dozens of photographs are superbly reproduced, and there is little overlap between the selected illustrations and the stock of previously published works. Kleiman brings a unique authority to his text and adroitly unpacks the role drawings played in Eisenstein's personal and professional ventures. The author's engagement with preserving and promoting Eisenstein's oeuvre extends back decades—almost from the moment Kleiman first arrived in Moscow as a student at VGIIK, the state training institute for filmmakers, in the mid-'50s. With Atasheva, he worked to effect the release of *Ivan the Terrible, Part II*, in 1958; during the mid-'60s, he also helped edit six key volumes of the filmmaker's theoretical writings for Russian publication. These initiatives revived awareness both at home and abroad of Eisenstein's immense contributions to the theory and art of cinema. This book is only his latest significant contribution to Eisenstein studies.



Sergei Eisenstein's set design for the first act of *The Mexican: The Meeting of the Revolutionary 'Junta,'* 1921.

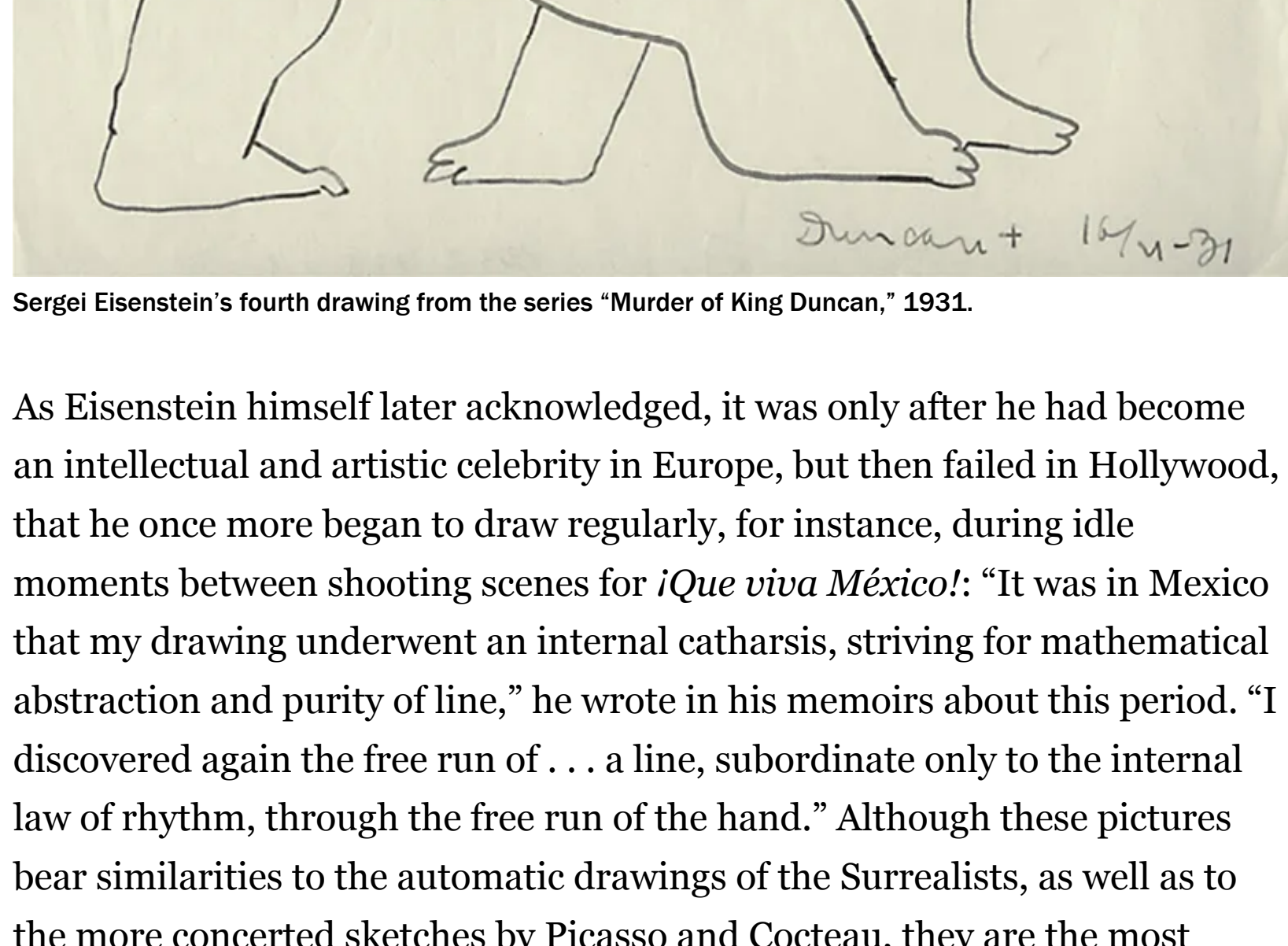
IN “THROUGH THEATRE TO CINEMA” (1934), Eisenstein's first major autobiographical essay, he assigned surprisingly little importance to drawing in his creative process. Kleiman's fundamental contribution in *Eisenstein on Paper* is to challenge this self-assessment by reconceiving the filmmaker's progression as “from drawing, via the theatre, to the cinema.”

Through his extensive coverage of the surprisingly sophisticated juvenilia Eisenstein produced while still in Riga, Latvia, Kleiman persuasively demonstrates that some of the director's key theoretical concepts and stylistic tropes first emerged in these sketches. While largely self-taught, Eisenstein modeled his earliest humorous depictions of the state officials, dowagers, and bourgeois tradesmen he saw around him on those of noted caricaturists such as Olaf Gulbransson and Wilhelm Busch, whose cartoons he discovered in European magazines. His own small comic strips show how precociously alert he was to the physical peculiarities of character types; here was the theory of “typage,” *in nuce*, and it bore fruit in his later cinematic achievements. The influence of J. J. Grandville's allegorical fantasies, which converted humans into animals, is also apparent in Eisenstein's predilection for human-animal metaphors and even partially explains his enthusiasm for Disney's anthropomorphic animated characters such as Mickey Mouse and Dumbo.



Drawings were essential, of course, during Eisenstein's training as a set and costume designer and as a fledgling stage director. After a stint serving in the entertainment troupe of the Eighteenth Engineering Regiment of the Red Army during the Russian Civil War, he took an assignment to study Japanese in Moscow as an opportunity to enter the city's febrile world of radical theater. He first worked at the radical Proletkult theater as a designer, and then took the opportunity to study with his revered master Vsevolod Meyerhold; they soon had a falling-out, however, and Eisenstein returned to the Proletkult as a director. His sketches, clearly intended as pragmatic production and performance guides, reveal an exceptional degree of stylistic versatility. Highly finished and brilliantly colored, they sometimes deploy a decorative realism; at other times, they embody the Cubo-Futurist style then in vogue in vanguard Moscow theaters. Kleiman has assembled the largest portfolio yet published of these designs, whose geometric shapes recall such pioneering spectacles as Malevich's *Victory over the Sun*, 1913, even as they anticipate Yakov Protazanov's science-fiction fantasy film *Aelita* (1924). All highlight the twenty-three-year-old Eisenstein's maturing as an equal with other major contemporaries, including Vladimir Tatlin, Alexandra Exter, and Alexander Vesnin, who were active in Russian stagecraft during the early '20s.

Few drawings exist from the roughly five-year period after 1924 when Eisenstein began his filmmaking career, yet it's unclear whether that means few were produced or few have survived. Kleiman suggests that fashioning film images through the camera obviated any need to draw them in advance, although one is left to wonder how the young director actualized his ideas in the new art form without preparatory sketches.



Sergei Eisenstein's fourth drawing from the series “Murder of King Duncan,” 1932.

As Eisenstein himself later acknowledged, it was only after he had become an intellectual and artistic celebrity in Europe, but then failed in Hollywood, that he once more began to draw regularly, for instance, during idle moments between shooting scenes for *iQue viva México!*: “I was in Mexico that my drawing underwent an internal catharsis, striving for mathematical abstraction and purity of line,” he wrote in his memoirs about this period. “I discovered again the free run of . . . a line, subordinate only to the internal law of rhythm, through the free run of the hand.” The resulting pictures bear similarities to the automatic drawings of the Surrealists, as well as to the more concerted sketches by Picasso and Cocteau, they are the most dazzlingly original he ever made. Many were part of a series linked by plot or as variations on a theme, and are best understood in the context of the larger whole. In the images inspired by Shakespeare's *Macbeth* making up the series “Murder of King Duncan,” 1931, Eisenstein's pencil moves over the page almost without interruption, outlining elegant, volumeless figures and depicting, with sometimes shockingly sadistic intensity, the helplessly sleeping victim eviscerated, amputated, or decapitated. In these 127 drawings, created with astonishing speed over only a few days, Eisenstein dispenses with perspective or shading. Duncan, Macbeth, and the latter's wife float in a kind of mental space, without horizon or gravity. Similar lines, sometimes augmented with rudimentary shadings, inform other series from this period, such as those displaying powerfully idiosyncratic, syncretic mythologies around Christian themes or bullfighting. Combining traditional tropes from the Passion of Christ with pagan and erotic motifs to create what Eisenstein regarded as “emotional hieroglyphs of pre-cognition,” these drawings ostentatiously flirt, sometimes disturbingly, with anti-Catholic blasphemy and pornography. Flipping gender roles and making light of perversity, these works are among Eisenstein's most daring and eccentric creations. Kleiman includes very few of them—certainly not the raunchiest!—in the book.

Anyone curious about these images should consult the ample selection in Galia Ackerman and Jean Claude Marcadé's *Dessins secrets* (Secret Drawings), published in France in 1999.

For Kleiman, the series “Murder of King Duncan,” “Bullfight,” 1931, and “Despair,” 1937, are nothing less than a kind of “visual diary of [Eisenstein's] inner life.” He does not regard them, however, merely as confessional or as sublimations of perverse, prelogical impulses. Rather, they represent a mode through which Eisenstein ambitiously attempted “to decipher the genetic code of the creative process itself,” always in a spirit of free play that marked him as an amateur, perhaps, but not as a dilettante.

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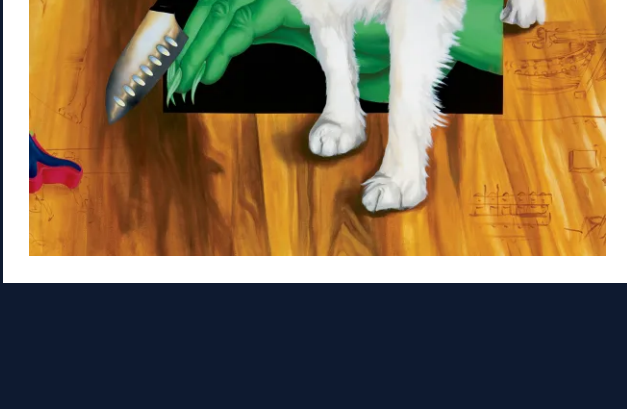
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