Dear Makkushka!

I was very pleased to receive your letter. It was really marvelous to read that someone takes some interest in me, aside from their interest in Mexico. I am not at all accustomed to that. If my "doppelgänger" is, deep within his "soul," an old, sentimental Jew, then he's in for even harsher treatment than a "second" V. V. [Mayakovsky]. You see, I don't even have anyone to cry to on the telephone. Not only here where the country doesn't run on telephones... You and Pera² are perhaps the only ones who know that I'm quite without "armor"—I don't mean in the sense of a battleship. There is a kind of lizard here [the armadillo], a cross between a common lizard and a turtle, out of which they make elegant little baskets by sticking the tail into the neck, degutting it, and lining the inside with scarlet or sky-blue silk. Sometimes they use them to make mandolins, which moan piteously. My very tender "doppelgänger" bleeds continually and his armor has to be constantly mended and tightened to keep it from completely... falling apart. Not as Pudovkin would tighten his—I don't discipline mine. And not in V. V.'s style either—I don't keep mine in check. The vigor of our so-called creativity lies in the dialectical fusion of "blood" and "iron"!!! This becomes monstrous only when there is a break in the creative process, and during moments of rest. "Oh, if one could only produce without rest!" But I also have a third self. Actually, I

1. Of the letters written to Maxim Strauch from Mexico, Strauch reproduces two in his contribution to Eisenstein in the Reminiscences of His Contemporaries (Moscow, 1974). "Makkushka" derives from Strauch's childhood nickname, Mak.
2. Eisenstein married Pera Atasheva in October 1934.
think he’s the main one: a cross between the “flying Dutchman,” a conquistador of
the Americas, and a “victim of the evening” soaked in blood and tears. He is a
quiet, closet scientist with a microscope, searching out the mysteries of creative
processes and phenomena, which submit to analysis only with difficulty. Now,
of course, this respectable fellow is in a situation of high comedy: between
earthquakes, drought-ridden tropics, tropical downpours, and other such
elements—on carriages, airplanes, trucks, horseback, steamers, and from time to
time, on trains, he carries himself as if he were in Voltaire’s armchair. To put it
more simply, the theoretical work continues without interruption. Analytic
methods of great refinement and endless synthetic amplifications present
themselves on the most curious occasions (crocodile hunting or at Indian dances
involving turkeys, during which each dancer has to strangle a live turkey—there
are twelve dancers, the one who doesn’t succeed in wringing his turkey’s neck is
beaten up by the other eleven! we could not film it!! and other similar attractions).
If only I had time to explore Quetzalcoatl, Kukulcan, and other Mexican gods,
to be able to set it all down in a book... and one more monument to “vulgar
materialism” would go down in the history of the “mechanists.” My position, let’s
say, is not one of belief in Deborin’s spiritualism. I will start believing in God
(with a capital G!!!) the moment I discover a mechanically insoluble obstacle in
my work—I am happy to confess that so far this hasn’t happened. My theoretical
work has come a long way from its position prior to my departure. Fortunately,
it’s headed in the direction of ever-greater simplification, clarity, and scale. I’m
even managing to get a great deal of reading done. Such serious things as Lévy-
Brühl—Reasoning Among Primitive Peoples (en français). Besides providing
vast corroborative material, it is, of course, the indispensable key to future battles
with... Sutyrin! I haven’t learned to speak Spanish yet. No time. I can’t afford to
spend one percent of my attention on it. I want to learn the language
automatically. So far, I can read Ibáñez’s Blood and Sand in Spanish without
much difficulty (and understand more than when I first read Zola in the original!).
Although I have deftly adjusted to “armchair” work in a Pushkin-like
“kibitka”—my own kind of thinking gyroscope!—I still feel a terrible need to
settle down and finally consolidate the theoretical organism. Yes, and what’s more,
I’m doing a great deal of drawing!

Actually, the filming, theory, and drawing are done in “relays” so as to keep
going at all costs. Yesterday I rode horseback at a gallop for five miles—the horses
here are devils (they belong to Mexican cowboys) through maguey fields (a
thorny cactus). Not only did I keep my seat like a thoroughbred “charro”

3. Possibly a reference to Abram Deborin’s attitude toward Marxism.
5. V. Sutyrin was an activist in RAPP, the Writers’ Association that had assumed control of
published work (1925-32).
6. A covered cart or sledge.
(cowboy), but I even felt that the constant exertion and gallop with these horses matched my normal state of being! Whither are we bound and do we not rush in vain!!

As merchandise, the film is wonderful.

But now I’m “spoiled.” Once I embodied the “ideal spectator.” Then everything turned out well. Now I seem to have become too refined; I feast my eyes on . . . reality, regardless of any need to select and put in order. Of course, the visual is on a higher level, but I’m afraid that the standard visual “thermometer” is gone. Perhaps it’s simply a “trauma” from the sad fate of The General Line; in any case, reality now seems unrepresentable. We’ll see. I’m working with a great push. Almost alone, because Grishka is having stomach trouble. Influence of the tropics on northern intestines! So, it seems I have given you a complete account of myself. Don’t judge me too severely—“Tu l’as voulu, Georges Dandin”—you asked for it! I have to finish up now—we have to ride twenty-five miles to a ball organized for the regional Indians. We’re to recruit “typage” for the episodes of savage passion in the maguey fields. We’re getting ready “to drive ahead” so there will be little time to write. You, however, should write more often and just as thoroughly as you’ve been doing.

I am very dissatisfied with what you and Ida are doing. One must apply pressure, pull strings, debase oneself, be diplomatic, crafty, cunning, and again press. The main thing is to do. To really get down to it. You have what it takes: real force. You have to drop the Oblomov act. What do you mean by “I asked for a leave but didn’t go to Leningrad”? Maybe what you both need is to work in Leningrad? I don’t know what is being done there now, but you should be on the lookout. You are at the point where your actual age begins to merge with the gallery of “characters” in your range. You remember, I often spoke to you about that, and you shouldn’t waste this time for any reason. The same goes for Idka! What idiocy!

Thanks for “The Old Man in Felt Boots”—it’s very good, but it is only a small, a very small fraction of what it should be. Don’t forget that all “prominent figures” are first and foremost great businessmen. Without enormous “organizational” preparation nothing ever gets anywhere or comes to anything: what Victor Hugo and Diego Rivera have in common is that both are great

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7. After the departure from Moscow of the Eisenstein group, their revised film was released publicly under the title Old and New (November 7, 1929).
9. Strauch’s actress wife, Judith Glizer. They lived in rooms adjoining Eisenstein’s on Chisty Prudy Street.
10. The central character of Ivan Goncharov’s novel, Oblomov, became a catchword for laziness, evasion, and lack of initiative.
11. In Leningrad, N. Loiter organized a new theater and invited Strauch and Glizer to join it.
12. Glizer had written and acted in a sketch performed at the Writers’ Club—a monologue of a bearded old peasant.
fighters! That fact is at the base of all "genius." It's only in fairy tales that roast geese fly magically into your mouth . . . I can "see" you from here—there you are, gazing at the remarkable things Meyerhold is doing and . . . delighting in it all. You are gazing and thinking, this is quite sufficient! I think it's foolish of you not to have taken GIK's offer. As for theory, of course nothing comes easy—the "mechanists" are going to make it very hard for us. We will have to be in total control of the method to be able to put it at the service of practice, our own practice—practical work is of the utmost consequence. Fifty percent of my reason for going to GIK was to be able to have it all down cold, "to show it." You seem to have plenty of leisure.

Well, it seems the whole thing is turning into a total checkmate. And the car is ready to go.

One more thing. Learn to find a place where you can apply what it is you want to do. Go to the club. Organize something for yourself and Idka. Find materials. Playing small roles, even with Meyerhold, is not work.

Later in the day.
Having returned, I'll continue. We still didn't find the girl. We have the young man. The enclosed supplement No. 2 gives you an idea of the "fortress" we live in. Haciendas have their own style, more like fortified castles than estates. All around, as far as the eye can see—maguey. You'll get a photo of them.

In the center of the hacienda's ground plan you will notice a familiar word—a golden word . . . Titina. One would like to have, inside these insurmountable walls, a "Pianola" with "Titina" sitting on top. We will protect her—preeminenty from Eduard Kazimirovich [Tisse] in every spare moment from filming. Valeska. Valeska. Valeska . . .

In any case, combining her with Mexico is amusing! I recently got a letter from her: "... Pudovkin was here, he took down your address and is planning to write . . ." (Evidently taking down my address is one of Lodik's [Pudovkin's] favorite pastimes!)

Now I'll wind up this excessively long letter.
(NB. A strict word-count has been kept, and I suggest that you respond with no fewer!)

I embrace you warmly.

Write.

Your Starik [Old Man].

13. Strauch was invited to teach at the State Cinema Institute.
15. The heroine of Chaplin's song, sung to the Russian group in Hollywood, and later used in Modern Times (1936).
16. Valeska Gert, the German dancer and actress.
Give Judith my sincere blessings, my best wishes and greetings. The work here needs a few more months, after which I'll make my way back across Japan. One way or another, till we meet again soon.

Hacienda Tetlapayac, Hidalgo, Mexico.
8-10 May 1931
Write to "Hotel Imperial," only don't send letters registered—they forward all ordinary mail.

[Strauch also quotes fragments of other letters from Mexico:]

... Very sorry that you're both enduring nonsense about the repertoire [at the Theater of Revolution?].

Apparently you'll have to wait for my return, as I am bringing a wonderful play about Hollywood\(^\text{17}\) ... There's a role for you—"a bullet"—as if it had been written especially for you ... And for Idka two roles—for her choice.

... I want to stage the Hollywood play myself. Somewhere, where we can all work. Will this work out—I don't know. I want it for "old times' sake."  

[this was signed]
With fatherly blessings
Sergo.

[17 September 1931]

Dear Makkushka!

I must say there isn't much point in proving to you that you are an intolerable creature. But you've already endured the punishment for silence. I am over my head in difficulties but at such times my writing becomes volcanic, and in the last two or three weeks you might have received a goodly share of model pastoral epistles and exhortations. Didn't I deliberately write you that I took for granted and deserved answers to the letters I had written you! Our difficulties are not altogether over, so you've managed to get the tail of the writing period. Now, point by point.

Of course the main thing is your work.

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Your comment about Ilyusha\(^{18}\) rather surprised me. It’s true I’ve seen hardly anything—except for two reels of *Express\(^{19}\)* (in Leningrad, rough cut), but it seemed to me that in the compositions, at least, he does satisfactory work. Moreover, everyone who has seen *Express* praised him highly. You’ll see this more clearly, and I enclose a letter to him, which I hope will help you in what you should say to him. This is what should be done: you were an eyewitness to the way in which I “drove” the directors in the necessary direction in the case of *The Mexican* or *Tsar Hunger.\(^{20}\) You are now far more experienced than I was at that time. Again, it’s a question of prestige. If you take Ilyusha in the right direction, you’ll naturally be able to steer him as you should. He is painfully touchy. I forcefully knocked the last vestiges of his image of himself as a “leading” journalist out of him. I don’t know what he’s like now. But if you could, without offending him, prevail upon him, using “my example,” that is, using my way of speaking, intonation, and so on (but for you, taking on my image would be easy!), you could shape him into obedience and submission, exploiting his conventional reflex to my “authority.” Don’t laugh, but take this very seriously and please “don’t feel ashamed.” Otherwise you’re a fool and the work with the old man [Meyerhold] and me didn’t teach you anything (besides a superficially critical attitude). Or else—as I would like to believe—you must now be very skilled as few others are. After all, you’ve also had a taste of bad directors, which, if one already has a foundation, is even more useful for self-development. (It’s very likely that the business with Valkii [Smyshlayev] and Tikhonovich\(^{21}\) gave me more than did the winter with the old man!) Again, there’s your impudence, enough for anything—from getting into a theater without a ticket to smacking a fellow straight in the mug, even if that mug has “a museum significance”!

Therefore, of course, you have to take Ilyusha and his film secretly into your hands. One always has to go through this. As he doesn’t have a little pointed beard, you will have to wear one for him. If you can’t do it directly, or if Ilyusha has some sort of pathological fixation on some piece of junk (actor, situation, a section of the scenario) and it’s impossible to talk him out of it—use irony. Your nature makes it very easy for you to produce the effect of a “frightening and mysterious man behind glasses.” An unrelenting ironic stance is a powerful weapon, and it should work on Ilyusha whose self-confidence I hope isn’t inborn

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18. Ilya Trauberg, younger brother of Leonid Trauberg, completed his first film, *Blue Express* (December 1929), based on an idea by Sergei Tretyakov. The younger Trauberg had worked on the Leningrad scenes of *October*. Strauch was at the time playing the chief role of Franz in Trauberg’s *Dlya vás naidyotsya rabota* (*Work Will be Found for You*). This film, completed in 1932, is the subject of Eisenstein’s September letters to Strauch and Trauberg.

19. The American title of *Blue Express* was *China Express*.

20. Two plays designed by Eisenstein, Jack London’s *The Mexican* at Proletcult, and Andreyev’s *Tsar Hunger* at the Foregger Workshop.

21. V. Smyshlayev and V. Tikhonovich were directors at Proletcult. Eisenstein studied and worked with Meyerhold through the winter of 1921–22.
(or he would be “a bride in whom one can already see a sad widow”—that is, a goner). Generally, this “mask” is one that requires the least fuss and works very successfully. Only please, open up and get out of this thick apathy of loose, vacillating bodies of people who understand so little! You must. Seriously, I am strongly hindered, but because of all the difficulties, the work drags on. I think it’s good merchandise. The photography, shot by shot, is great. What it will be as a whole—we’ll see. It is well planned and conceived. I hope I have the guts to finish it.

All that you write pro the old man surprises me a bit. I wouldn’t expect it of you. I warned you about the “theater of the actor,” a position directly opposed to mine when we were still in Proletcult. Meyerhold never put together a “whole” production, remember how his “Cuckold” was totally unbearable from the audience’s viewpoint—a series of tricks, acted set pieces. I explained the illusions to you—that for him it is enough to follow the actor in performance and that it is totally irrelevant whether or not the performer does what should be done. I was attracted to that because it is the only way to master the actor’s working method, not applying it empirically as the old man does, but systematically, and in an informed way, as method of expression, as I tried and am still trying to do. The moment I realized these principles I characteristically grew fed up with “acting” and transferred to the nonacted cinema. (In “weak” moments I feel a regressive tendency toward actor, theater, and so on, sometimes even now!)

The issue of “unity and wholeness” is not a question of the Moscow Art Theater, but one of dialectics. Funnily enough, there was a rumor here that the old man had died (later we learned that the rumor was Ehrenburg’s!) and I drafted an obituary (don’t tell him—he would die of suspicion alone!!). Putting together sensibly what I know of Meyerhold, I came to the conviction that he is a very curious “nondialectic” type and the epitome of “dualism” (for theater, there is a domain of psychology). That being so, the dualist, going to the extreme, slides into a monistic dialectic . . . but does not take the leap. Between Meyerhold (in his development, concepts, interpretations, and even in his personal relations) and the dialectical process there is that perceptible difference which exists between “a unity of opposites” and “contrast”; in practice this means a gulf. Contrast is a surrogate “unity of opposites” for “the poor.” Just as there is dualism, there is also a simple mechanical understanding of the monism of dual polarities. (It’s characteristic that Greek philosophers, though idealists, were still dialecticians, and it was the Romans, the Yankees of antiquity, who “simplified” the dialectic concept into a static one, from which pairs of opposites evolved outside a unity!)

This analysis of the old man will probably go into my book (if such a book is to be!) as an example of dialectics remaining “on the very periphery,” cringing from a real dialectic principle. It is curious in every way: from Meyerhold as a whole to

22. Meyerhold’s production of Crommelynck’s Le Cocu Magnifique was staged in 1922.
the most trivial detail of his work—we find one single principle: the absence of a conceptual "unity," an absolutely inevitable symptom of everything he does.

What do you think of this? Perhaps it hasn't been put clearly or strongly enough (that is, beyond demonstration). Although you know him well enough to be able to smell the truth of what I write about him . . .

[Strauch here deletes a passage critical of Meyerhold, and quotes from an undated "next letter": "Go and see the 'old man's' work more often. He'll die and you won't find anything like it anywhere. Give him my greetings and tell him that I love him."]

I am sending you a group photo with the Spanish ambassador and the Foreign Minister, Senor Xenaro Estrada, because he absolutely duplicates your make-up in "Lena" [23] (the picture on the postcard is of the annual Spanish fiesta "Covedonga" here). The Spanish Republic hasn't reached the point of "red carnations"; little berries and apples arrive from time to time. But the ambassador [24] is an old acquaintance—he once interviewed me on Chisty Prudy for his book and for the Spanish-American newspaper! From the moment of our mutual recognition he will be an ambassador for us!

Well, I should finish this and write Ilyusha [Trauberg] a letter to place in your envelope. You can give it to him sealed or unsealed, but you must read it (the way in which it's forwarded to him depends on the degree, temporary or continuous, of warmth and intimacy in your relations with him). In general he is not Room; [25] one really has to influence him (in moderation) and with a maximum of real collaboration. Don't misunderstand me; he is not only good, but I think he will be worthwhile. And it is worth being persistent.

Give my heartfelt greeting to "the old man" and to Zizi. [26] Also my regrets that we will be in different cities this winter (which applies to you too! . . .).

When you write, give my regards to the household and pray for me, just to make sure we didn't "pray badly!" Sometimes I am truly reminded of the Mugan steppe [27] (it's true that the proletariat there doesn't feed on bananas, which, served with cream, sounds like a delicacy!).

I embrace you.

Your Old Man.

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23. Lena [Goldfields], a play by Valerian Pletnyov, was produced by Eisenstein for Proletcult in 1921.
25. Abram Room, for whom Strauch played in Barbusse's Ghost that Will not Return (1930).
26. Zinaida Reich, Meyerhold's wife and actress in his theater.
27. Location for part of the filming of Old and New.
Letters from Mexico

Dear Ilyusha!

This letter will fall short of the usual outpourings of tenderness, not for want of them (that's quite unthinkable!), but because this is a business letter, to be sent through Maxim Maximovich, who is indiscreet and capable of examining it. This letter attempts to address in full another of his indiscretions, namely, that he has talked against you, as does not befit the relation of a disciplined actor to his director. But that is very superfluous evidence of the actual reason for the slander, namely, that the director is not on the highest level. Without giving concrete instances, M. M. expresses his imperfect satisfaction with what you are doing. No factual evidence is available to me, but my work with M. M. over a period of many years convinces me that his purpose is reasonable, and that I would probably agree. He is a very thoughtful man, who has passed through the hands of good, capable directors and wallowed a little with bad ones, which can, I think, be useful for self-development. For it forces one not only to develop a critical resistance, but to work out as well (from inside) “one's own variant”—in reply to the director’s mistaken ideas. I began my work as a designer with directors of just this sort, and it brought me considerably more than my winter with Meyerhold, where I found myself in conditions (apart from the obligations of discipline) of sincere prostration before perfect mastery. I was very glad to hear from Pera [Atasheva] (and why not from you!) that M. M. was going to work with you. He can be of enormous use to you. It is true that he is very modest and has a rather contemplative disposition. To be able to use him you have to tug him completely in your direction. While he was my assistant,28 I was indebted to him for many valuable suggestions, much advice, and personal initiative. It is my belief that advice (highly qualified advice) can’t harm anyone, and if you still have my senile, decrepit admonitions in mind, then you will recall how I always listen attentively, and if the analysis does not reveal too much of a personal bias, then I can really exploit it. There should be no question of “personal conflict” in your work together; it’s a family affair. After all, you are both from my own spacious nest. My only concern is that you should both enjoy a maximum of fruitfulness and success in your work. In all work there is a moment of “check”; you’ve let yourself slip, and then suddenly something stops and one’s forced to put oneself “under suspicion” (as Meyerhold said: true in relation to . . . others!). To sniff out falseness, the possibility of evasion, an insufficient rigor in one’s own work, a break in the idea, and so on. It often takes place at the screening of a large quantity of rushes, unseen for a long while. And this happens to be of quite vital usefulness (after, perhaps, two–three days of hystericis, and that, too, is hygienic, not

28. Strauch worked as assistant director on Battleship Potemkin (1925), October (1927), and Old and New (1929).
dangerous! ). I don’t know how it is with you, but it happens to me regularly, always. No matter if this letter appears to be a “check” on self-analysis. Without recalling this to Fridke, you may remember how useful my “check” turned out to be for Oblomok—after it, [Ermler] discarded everything he had shot for the beginning and reshot the whole beginning, finding in himself everything that was needed. I am quite sure that your case is not so serious—the success of “Express,” which I haven’t seen, confirms it. But after every regular period of work, it is not a bad thing to turn and take a look at “what you were, and what you have become, and what you now have.” (I know this for myself and from experience.) Maxim will certainly be very useful to you in this because he has a wonderfully true eye and an interest in directing (that means an interest wider than the limits of his role). He has always had it, as long as we’ve worked together in theater and cinema.

Naturally, it would be nice if you wrote me about what you are doing. Though I’m old, decrepit, and worn out by life, I might still be of some use to you. Of course it may be that you are now such a fire chief on the film front that the senile voice of “bygone falcons” is not for you...

Anyway—why the devil don’t you ever write?

If this is your silent little answer to the last letter I sent you from Hollywood, then it’s no use: your letter arrived there with its materialized fantastika right in the midst of thunderclaps of an approaching break-up, and the storm in the Paramount swamp washed over the letter’s suppositions—and I made straight for the Mexican shore. I hope that you will never—either now or in the future—have to go through the peripeteia we’ve experienced these last years, be it in Europe, the States, or Mexico. Though it’s all marvelous and fascinating, looking back on what has happened, I sometimes ask myself: where did I get the nerves to endure all this!? It has not been without roses (there were quite a few!), but there also have been enough fangs!

Right now I feel a wild impulse to return, but all sorts of difficulties are prolonging our stay. There seems to be no single article or situation in international film affairs that I haven’t taken on—you know that for me knowledge is the sweetest fruit!

Answer this—let’s set up an epistolary exchange in anticipation of those happy days when I shall once again be able to embrace you.

Your Old Man

Mexico DF, 17 September 1931
Address: c/o American Embassy.

S. M. Eisenstein, Mexico, DF.

29. Friedrich Ermler.
30. Oblomok imperii, Ermler’s film of 1929, shown in the U.S. as Fragment of an Empire.
31. Ilya Trauberg’s letter to Eisenstein reached him in Hollywood in the midst of the Paramount crisis and his departure for Mexico.