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Propaganda in Motion

Dziga Vertov's and Aleksandr Medvedkin's Film Trains and Agit Steamers of the 1920s and 1930s

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Abstract: This article focuses on Soviet agit-trains, initiated in the year 1918, as an important instrument for the dissemination of political propaganda and for the enlightenment of the rural population. These trains were not only used to produce and distribute newspapers and leaflets but were additionally equipped with mobile, independent film production units and cinemas. The directors Dziga Vertov (1896-1954) and Aleksandr Medvedkin (1900-1989) can serve as examples of two different models for how moving images were used as agit-prop. Vertov was already working along these lines during the time of the Civil War in Russia (1917 to 1923), when the railway network was used among other things to maintain support for the Red Army fighting at the front lines. This article aims to shed light on a lesser known chapter in Vertov's life, emphasising the influence these early experiences had on his creative work later on. Medvedkin's Film Train project on the other hand focused explicitly on laying bare and denouncing the farmer's shortcomings using the medium film. This position has its roots in the changed political situation in the 1930s, when the Party relentlessly pushed collectivisation and the first five-year-plan. Although their approaches differed somewhat, both directors developed new strategies for the mediation of political messages through the medium of film, which steered audiences and facilitated their immediate involvement. Comparisons can therefore be made between Vertov and Medvedkin's working methods and the modern information age, particularly in light of their shared interest in technical progress and their independent efforts to achieve maximum mobility when shooting and screening films.

Keywords: Dziga Vertov; Aleksandr Medvedkin; Soviet Union; Russian Civil war; agit-train; film train; agitation; propaganda; documentary film



Using art for propaganda and agitation was an expressed wish of Soviet political leaders at the beginning of the 1920s. While the first agit-trains, on which Vertov worked, were meant to support the Red Army forces at the front lines during the Russian Civil War (1917-1923), Aleksandr Medvedkin's film train ten years later had a quite different goal. In both cases, however, the State power and the Communist Party sent trains and steamers to the periphery of the vast Soviet territory to spread their political message and to educate the (mostly) illiterate populace as well as children. The trains had many uses. For example, political leaders like Lev Trotskii often travelled in them to inspect the front lines. At every station along the tracks, propaganda material was distributed to civilians and soldiers of the Red Army. Agitational stations (agitpunkty) were established at major railway stations, where libraries, lecture halls and often theatres were opened. The Hungarian writer Arthur Holitscher for example noticed such agitation stations in his report from 1921:

In the hall of the railway station – in every train station hall, even in the smallest village – the door of a wooden shed is open, and above this shed one can read the word agitpunkt. In this shed a man sells and distributes agitation brochures, leaflets and the official newspapers. The hall is, like the walls of all cities, plastered all over with posters and newspapers (Holitscher 2012: 55).

While the political section drew up itineraries and organized the work, the information section was responsible for organizing lectures, distributing brochures, and it also controlled the film projector (Kenez 1985: 60). Cinema was considered a very powerful instrument in agitational work and films were even produced just to be shown in agit-trains. The Soviet People's Commissar of Enlightenment responsible for culture and education, Anatolii Lunacharskii, wrote in 1919:

Furthermore, the main task of cinema in both its scientific and feature divisions is that of propa-



Fig. 1: Photo. Courtesy of Dziga Vertov-Collection Austrian Film Museum, Vienna.

ganda. Generally speaking, every art, as Tolstoy once remarked, is above all a means of instilling the artist's emotions into the masses. Education in the wider sense of the word consists in the dissemination of ideas among minds that would otherwise remain a stranger to them. Cinema can accomplish both these things with particular force: it constitutes, on the one hand, a visual clarion for the dissemination of ideas and, on the other hand, if we introduce elements of the refined, the poetic, the pathetic etc., it is capable of touching the emotions and thus becomes an apparatus of agitation (Taylor and Christie 1988: 47).



Fig. 2: Photo. Courtesy of Dziga Vertov-Collection Austrian Film Museum, Vienna.

Also the newspaper *Kommunar* reported on November 3, 1918:

Films with a revolutionary character will also be widely used at the Front. The Committee is organizing ten special trains, named after Comrade Lenin, three of which will be leaving for the Fronts at the beginning of November. The trains will have a mobile camera, set up in a car. Film Material will also be sent to the provinces (Anonymous 2004: 38).

The trains were equipped with a so called “polit office”, a complaints office (this office was very important and used extensively by the population, most of the complaints were dealt with on the spot), an information office, an editorial office, a newspaper office, a print shop, a cinema, etc. These offices were staffed by agitators who had been sent from the Central Committee, as well as People’s Commissars, who served as instructors. The 16 to 18 car long trains carried a radio station and even had their own internal telephone system. Although there are rumours about mobile film labs on the trains, to date there is no evidence of this (MacKay 2015). The raw film was usually sent to larger labs in the cities. There is also no proof that films freshly shot by agit-film cameramen were presented on the journey. On average a train carried about a hundred people, of which only 15-20 were engaged in practical agitation, the rest were support staff (Kenez 1985: 59).



Fig. 3: Photo. Courtesy of Dziga Vertov-Collection Austrian Film Museum, Vienna.¹

The vast amount of documents held by the Russian Archives, especially GARF (State Archive of

¹ See Dziga Vertov-Collection Online: <http://filmuseum.at/jart/prj3/filmuseum/main.jart?rel=en↔&content-id=1218679066711&reserve-mode=active>.

the Russian Federation, formed in 1992) are still awaiting detailed examination, although some contemporary reports and studies of individual trains have thus far been published.² After a brief overview over the agit-trains in the 1920s, I will focus on the work of the directors Dziga Vertov and Aleksandr Medvedkin. Even if they were working on trains at different times, and did not happen to share the same approach to filmmaking, there is still a common characteristic: They both brought messages to people in the periphery of the Soviet Union and were both passionate about a form of mobile cinema using the latest technology available. But I will get back to this at the end of this text.

1 Agit-trains in the 1920s

Supporting the Red Army troops fighting in the Civil War was an important task for the Communist Party and the Soviet State. Everywhere at the front lines special newspapers, leaflets and brochures for the soldiers and marines were published. In 1921 there were sixteen war journals and more than 100 newspapers and journals in circulation. Responsible for these activities was the so called War-office of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee (VTSIK), headed by Mikhail Kalinin from 1919 to 1938. Also the agit-trains occupied an important place in the vast network of agitation and instructional work at that time. The implementation of means of transport was decided in VTSIK already in 1918 on the initiative of the Central Committee. This initiative can be seen in context with Lenin’s plans to deal with the peasant question. He spoke about the agit-trains and agit-steamers on the 8th Congress of the Russian Communist Party, held in Moscow between March 18 and 23, 1919. In January 1920 and later on

² See for example Lidija Maksakova (1956), Anatolii Lemberg (1959), and Boris Sergeev (1938). A whole chapter in John MacKay’s (2015) forthcoming book will be dedicated to Agit-trains. The author uses a huge amount of sources from GARF and RGALI, which contributes immensely to a more comprehensive understanding.

February 3, Lenin gave more lectures, dedicated to the topic, in order to determine the priorities of the agit-trains and clarify the economical and practical aspects for the work on the trains and steamers.³

As can be seen in surviving images, the trains were decorated with graphical or satirical paintings, playfully reflecting the names of the trains and the places where they were headed.⁴ A Russian poster dating from 1920 reads: "From far-away this train has brought us valuable presents. Hurry up, comrades! This train won't be staying long. You must realize that a truthful and intelligent book will light your path in the struggle for a better future." (King 2009: 80). We also know that speeches by Lenin were recorded (thirteen in total, of which eight were made during his time) and the records were often played on the trains using wind-up gramophones (ibid.).

The first agit-train V. I. LENIN MOBILE MILITARY FRONT TRAIN (or LENIN for short) began service in August 1918. On its first journey it travelled from Moscow to Kazan. This was followed by a second journey to Belarus, Lithuania and Ukraine that took place between December 1918 and March 1919. According to other sources this happened between September 1918 and March 1919 (Kenez 1985: 60). Meanwhile, in a meeting held on January 11, 1919, the presidium of the Central Committee discussed "the situation of the literary-instructional trains of the VTSIK". Later these trains would be called "agitation-instructional trains", and at the beginning of 1920 a special commission was set up, represented by the department for agit-trains and steamers in the presidium of the VTSIK. The Political

Division, which was the primary immediate authority for the agit-trains, was divided into an instructional and an agitational section. While the first one was devoted to more on-site inspections and propaganda work (with specific groups and institutions), the second one focused on demonstrations, public lectures, cinema, that's the efforts to mobilize the population in general (MacKay 2015). In 1919/1920 the agit-train OCTOBER REVOLUTION was organized under the chair of VTSIK head Mikhail Kalinin (Lidiia Maksakova 1956: 7). It travelled twelve times altogether and was the most active one of all. The trains and steamers often bore names that referred to political leaders and political topics, like the aforementioned train OCTOBER REVOLUTION (which was nicknamed frequently the "The VTSIK on reels").⁵

The project to spread political messages and to educate using agit-trains and steamers was definitely a huge administrative and logistical undertaking. It held an important position in the Party Activities for Agitation. Between December 27, 1918 and December 12, 1920, the collective for agit-trains and steamers held 1,891 meetings, where 2,752,000 participants listened to 1,008 presentations. These one and all the following statistical data was taken from Lidiia Maksakova's book *Agitpoezd "Oktiabr'skaia Revoliutsiia" (1919-1920)*. In the year 1919 alone, 753 meetings (with more than a million attendees) and 400 gatherings of other kinds were held. More than 1,740 offices and organisations in the cities were involved. The print shops produced 1.5 million copies of newspapers and 1.5 million

3 For additional information particularly to understand the notion of trains as a central organizer of distribution, see Robert Linhart (1976).

4 For colour images of the trains see Vladimir Tolstoi (2006). A very useful publication is also the book by David King (2009). King informs us about some details connected to the decoration of the trains, for example that the first Agit-trains were laminated with posters; the following ones instead were painted with oil-based paint. He draws our attention to the publication by Viacheslav Polonskii (1925) and argues that the language and style used are very similar to the Russian Petrushka theatre.

5 All the journeys of the train OCTOBER REVOLUTION are listed in Maksakova (1956): 1) April 29, 1919 to May 18, 1919 to the Eastern Front; 2) June 6, 1919 to June 28, 1919 to Belarus and the Western Front; 3) July 12, 1919 to August 5, 1919 to the very important Southern Front; 4) August 31, 1919 to September 26, 1919 to the East, for example to Turkmenistan; 5) October 24, 1919 to November 19, 1919 to the Southern Front; 6) December 20, 1919 to January 2, 1920 to Sankt Petersburg and the Petersburg area; 7) January 6, 1920 to February 7, 1920 to the Don and Southern Front; 8) March 1, 1920 to March 26, 1920 to the Ukraine, and Don; 9) May 23, 1920 to June 5, 1920 to the South-Western Front; 10) August 8, 1920 to August 21, 1920 to the Don and Northern Caucasus; 11) October 10, 1920 to October 30, 1920 to the Southern Front; 12) November 12, 1920 to December 12, 1920 to Siberia.



Fig. 4: Still from Dziga Vertov, *Kinonedelia No. 23*, 1918. Still courtesy of Austrian Film Museum, Vienna.⁶

leaflets. Informational material worth more than 11 million roubles was given out and more than 2 million people attended cinema screenings and concerts. Furthermore, exhibitions were organized on the steamer RED STAR and on the train RED EAST. Two examples from *Kinonedelia No. 23 / Film-Week No. 23* (Dziga Vertov, 1918, USSR) and especially the *Kinonedelia No. 17 / Film-Week No. 17* (Dziga Vertov, 1918, USSR) allow some insight. In Fig. 4 we can see how agitational literature is being distributed to returning prisoners of war. Fig. 5 shows agit-trains carrying propaganda literature, which is later handed out to and read by the villagers.

The attendance figures have been more or less well recorded (MacKay 2015). The indispensable study by Maksakova has presented us with a detailed overview of all the journeys of the train OCTOBER REVOLUTION. We know that a total of 100,000 people visited shows in the agit-train cinemas on the second journey, climbing up to 116,000 people (in 97 shows) on the third journey. On its seventh trip, 32,750 people watched films in 34 screenings. After that the numbers varied, from fourteen shows with 50,000 attendees on the ninth journey, 50 screenings with more than 53,000 attendees on the tenth, and 33 shows with 57,000 visitors on

⁶ The issues held by the Austrian Film Museum can be viewed online in full length and with German and English translation: http://www.filmmuseum.at/en/collections/↔dziga_vertov_collection/kinonedelja__online_edition.



Fig. 5: Still from Dziga Vertov, *Kinonedelia No. 17*, 1918. Stills courtesy of Danish Film Institute and Austrian Film Museum, Vienna.

the eleventh. Still, given that the time span of each trip was approximately one month, these numbers are quite impressive. Fig. 7 shows the interior of a cinema car in an agit-train.



Fig. 6: Still from Dziga Vertov, *Kinonedelia No. 17*, 1918. Stills courtesy of Danish Film Institute and Austrian Film Museum, Vienna.

Political leaders would frequently travel to the front lines, conducting agitation and help to support the morale of the Red Army. The following two images are taken from different issues of the *Kinonedelia*, *Kinonedelia No. 3 / Film-Week No. 3* (Dziga Vertov, 1918, USSR) and *Kinonedelia No. 22 / Film-Week No. 22* (Dziga Vertov, 1918, USSR), which show the Head commander of the Soviet Army in the Northern Caucasus, Comrade Avtonomov (Fig. 8), and Lev Trotskii's meeting Czech troops in Penza (Fig. 9). David King's book does not only include

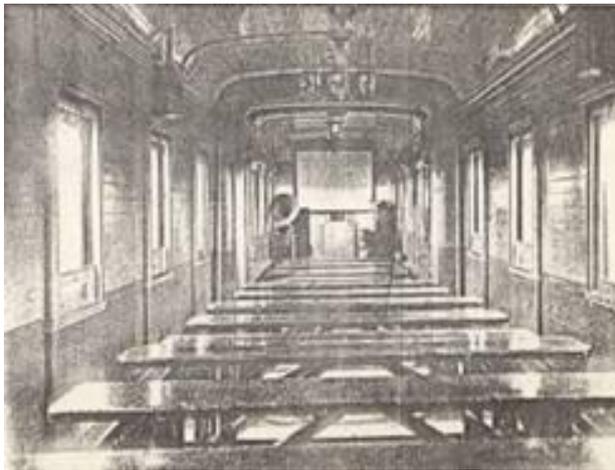


Fig. 7: Photo. Courtesy of Dziga Vertov-Collection Austrian Film Museum, Vienna.



Fig. 8: Still from Dziga Vertov, *Kinonedelia No. 3*, 1918. Still courtesy of Austrian Film Museum, Vienna.

great images of the agit-trains, but he also writes about Trotskii's way of using the trains for his goals:

Trotsky was able to communicate with the fighting units by radio and telegraph from his legendary "Train of the Chairman of the Revolutionary Military Council of the Republic", simply known as "Trotsky's Train". He lived on the train, with short breaks, for two and a half years, completing thirty six journeys to the various fronts and travelling over 100.000 kilometers. This mobile command post of fifteen carriages included his secretariat, a radio and telegraph station, print-shop, library, electricity generator, a mobile garage equipped with cars and trucks for visiting and supplying the fronts at close range and a kitchen and a bathroom (King 2009: 68).

Next to the train OCTOBER REVOLUTION (that travelled to the central regions and nearly all of the front lines of the Civil War, as well as the Ukraine, Don, Cuban, Northern Caucasus and Siberia) the best known trains are RED EAST (to Turkestan in March 1920), SOVIET CAUCASUS (Northern Caucasus and Azerbaijan in October 1920) and RED COSSACK (Don and Cuban area from April to July 1920). The most famous agit-steamer is without doubt the RED STAR, which travelled along the river Volga and river Kama between July 1919 and the fall of 1921 (Fig. 10).



Fig. 9: Still from Dziga Vertov, *Kinonedelia No. 22*, 1918. Still courtesy of Austrian Film Museum, Vienna.

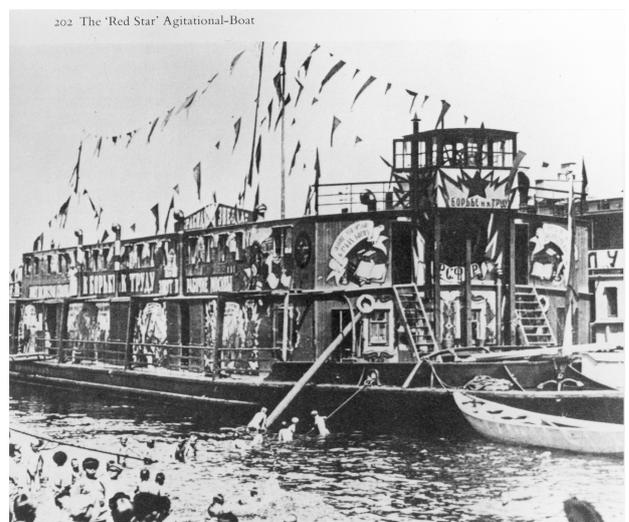


Fig. 10: Photo. Courtesy of Dziga Vertov-Collection Austrian Film Museum, Vienna.

2 Dziga Vertov's Mobile Cinema: On Reels, on Water, and on the Road

The young Dziga Vertov was enlisted by the VTSIK in order to manage the film and photo division of the trains in January 1920. This can be proven by several documents held in the Vertov-Collection in the Austrian Film Museum, for example the document "Confirmation (of the All-Russian Committee of the deputies of the Soviet of Workers, Cossacks and Red Army Soldiers)"⁷ or "Confirmation No. 11001"⁸. He had been head of cinema on some of the journeys of the agit-train OCTOBER REVOLUTION, and of RED EAST in 1920.⁹

Vertov personally travelled on the former during its eighth trip in March 1920, but probably not on RED EAST (MacKay 2015). In his diary entry he gives evidence of his journeys:

The next step was my work on the agit-trains of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee. Comrade Lenin attached great significance to the use of film in the work of the agitational trains and steamers. And so on January 6, 1920, I leave with Comrade Kalinin for the southeast front. I take films with me. Including THE ANNIVERSARY OF THE REVOLUTION.¹⁰ We study the new viewer. We screen that film at all the train stops and carry it to urban movie theatres. At the same time, we shoot. The result is a film about the journey of the all-Russian senior leader, Kalinin. The period of my work concludes with the big film A HISTORY OF THE CIVIL WAR (Vertov 1984a: 151).

7 This document has the shelf number D 007.

8 This document has been published (Österreichisches Film-museum, Tode and Wurm 2006: 218).

9 Thomas Tode claims that Vertov already travelled on the agit-train LENIN in April 22, 1919, but there is no final proof of this so far. He also mistakenly speaks of a train called RED OCTOBER, while it should have been RED EAST (Tode 2008: 143).

10 *Godovshchina revoliutsii / The Anniversary of the Revolution* (Dziga Vertov, 1918, USSR) can be considered Vertov's first film, and it exists in parts in the Russian State Documentary Film & Photo Archive (RGAKFD) in Krasnogorsk near Moscow.

The surviving documents tell a fascinating story of this time. Vertov kept daily registers of the films screened and more strikingly, detailed comments on the audiences' reaction (MacKay 2015). We know of a division into three categories: Soviet themes (for example short fictional agitational films), children's films and scientific-educational films. One of the most popular films was *Strekoza i muravei / The Grasshopper and the Ant* (Władisław Starewicz, 1913, Russia). We know further that inside the OCTOBER REVOLUTION cinema car and in theatres, the films were shown with musical accompaniment (either piano or gramophone records). Outdoors they were screened without, a fact Vertov strived to change (ibid.). MacKay cites the document RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 386, 1. 20. He also talks about the fact that Vertov's first partner, the Estonian pianist Olga Toom, headed up the first division on board the OCTOBER REVOLUTION in its fifth and sixth journey. She was also, like Vertov, involved with oral commentary and musical accompaniment.

But not only was the filmmaker intensely involved with the film exhibition, he was actually a film presenter too. This meant offering oral explanations and commentary, although it is not clear at what point this aid to the audience was provided (ibid.). Vertov took these tasks very seriously and he was not happy with the selection of prints at his disposal:

I had to provide explanations of the films for nearly every audience. Most of the films were made crudely and carelessly, and an average viewer seeing them for the first time cannot understand them completely. Solving the riddles with the glosses made the film understandable even to the nearly illiterate (ibid.).¹¹

It is not difficult to see the influence of these first working experiences in Vertov's later films. Examples can be found in his way of working with intertitles in addressing the audience directly, for example

11 MacKay quotes RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 386, 1. 19ob (from the report to Grigorii Lemberg).



Fig. 11: Photo. Courtesy of Dziga Vertov-Collection Austrian Film Museum, Vienna.



Fig. 12: Photo. Courtesy of Dziga Vertov-Collection Austrian Film Museum, Vienna.

in *Shestaia chast' mira / A Sixth Part of the World* (Dziga Vertov, 1926, USSR) or *Tri pesni o Lenine / Three Songs of Lenin* (Dziga Vertov, 1934, USSR) or the wish to be understood without words in his films at all, in *Chelovek s kinoapparatom / Man with the Movie Camera* (Dziga Vertov, 1929, USSR).¹² In Fig. 11 we have a rare example of not only images from agit-trains but also of the director himself, who is talking to staff of the train OCTOBER REVOLUTION in 1922. In Fig. 12 below on the other hand an unknown cameraman is shooting the activities around the agit-train RED COSSACK.

Vertov already mentions here that he was not just supervising the cinema shows, but was also making films about the activities on the train. Al-

12 I am grateful to John MacKay for drawing my attention to this.

though he speaks about a film starring Kalinin, only one film about the agit-trains, *Literaturno-instruktorskii agit-parokhod VTSIK "Krasnaia Zvezda" / The Red-Star Literary-Instructional Agit-Steamer of the All-Russia Central Committee* (Dziga Vertov, 1919, USSR), has survived in the archives. The film about Kalinin had the working title *The Agit-Train of the All-Russia Central Executive Committee*. It was never made, but meant to report about the seventh journey of the agit-train OCTOBER REVOLUTION in January 1920. Two paper documents, dated not later than October 1920, might be related to this film: "Work of the instructional-agitation trains of VTSIK at the bloodless and war front" and "Work of the Agit-trains of VTSIK at the bloodless war front". The latter one is a montage list with detailed descriptions of the shots, listing even the framing. The directorial notes cover the following topics:

Train in Moscow, children boarding the kino-train. Burov and proletarian poet Demjan Bedny. Comrade Radek. Czech delegation. Train leaves station, out of a tunnel. Train scatters literature. Kalinin. Listens to the train agitator, then Kalinin talks. Work front, then near the frontline. Agitator at a meeting with the workers of that small town. Budennyi meets the train. Meet an armoured train of the Whites. Red Army the newspaper! Tanks. Budennyj. A destroyed bridge, further no more passage. Kalinin, Budennyj, Vorošilov. To the polish front line (Deriabin 2004: 40).

Besides compiling the *Kinonedelia* newsreels, Vertov had even written a scenario for a fiction film built around the agit-train *Soviet Caucasus*, which travelled from July 1920 until October 1920.¹³ This is rather interesting because it is well known that Vertov has always been quite vocal in his fight for

13 See paper document with the title "Project of a scenario, intended for the shoot during the time of the agit-train 'Soviet Caucasus'", dated May 2, 1920 (Deriabin 2004: 44-47). Deriabin points out that Vertov possibly edited footage into film *Soviet Caucasus*, made by his friend and collaborator at that time, Anatolii Lemberg.

documentary films. From his notes we can learn that the story revolved around a young director called Boris Ogarev, who works in Moscow, but follows closely the Civil War in his native Georgian village Grozny. A young woman working as a saleswoman on an agit-train, Nadia Morozova, serves as a truly revolutionary love interest. When her next trip takes her to the Caucasus area, Boris decides to accompany her and joins the film team of the train. They also participate in social projects along the way, for example in the improvements of the sanitary facilities in the rural train stations. Having arrived in Grozny, Boris is reunited with his brother Mikhail, now appointed commissar and an example for everybody in fighting the White Army. Particularly interesting is how Vertov describes the apotheosis, which he titles “poetry of work and movement”, and lists motives which would later occur frequently in his films: a hammer hammering, electrical drills, wagons on rails, the turning wheels of the train, locomotives, steam trains, tractors, motor ploughs, sewing machines, thrashers, the rushing movement of cars, motorbikes and trolleys in the centre of a big city.

Throughout March 1922 Vertov became more involved with the administration of mobile cinema, until he started working on the *Kinopravda* newsreels that spring. Vertov struggled to create a mobile cinema and keep it going, stating his ideas about the dissemination of film in cities, along water routes, along railway lines, through special film wagons and automobiles.

Film cars (specially equipped, modelled after the cars of the agit-trains of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee). Screenings while en route, inside the car; on screens set up at the stations during stops. A travelling theatre serving settlements within a vicinity of about ten miles. [...] Film steamers, cinema barges, collapsible cinemas set up on shore, and mobile ones. The installation possibilities are greater than for the railway cinema. Searchlights for attracting the public would be desirable. A film laboratory is

possible. Branches on passenger steamers plying rivers are possible. Film-waggon travelling from town to town in the countryside, from village to village, also have major significance for advertising and propaganda (Vertov 1984b: 29).

Slavic studies scholar Emma Widdis informs us that by 1925 there were already 1,000 travelling cinemas with mobile projectors active in the Soviet Union, showing mostly documentaries (Widdis 2005: 131). In 1922 the situation did not look quite as promising. The VFKO (All-Russia Photo-Cine Department) of Narkompros had received only some parts of the film material and technical equipment which had been used in the early days of the agit-trains. However, despite the lack of machinery, the VFKO was quite active: Twice a week, mostly on Thursdays and Sundays two mobile cinemas were working in the Moscow squares, showing current newsreels and the *Kinopravda*. The number of viewers was estimated to be two to five thousand people every time (Anonymous 2004: 77). The *Kinopravda No. 9 / Film-Truth No. 9* (Dziga Vertov, 1922, USSR) shows how the director demonstrated a mobile cinema screening (Fig. 13 and 14).

He wanted the newsreels to be “live”, so how he perceived the idea of shooting and showing film was intrinsically connected with speed and movement, but also to working with limited possibilities. For this reason special cinema trucks were developed by the mechanic John Volk in 1920/1921 for service on the western front and in the villages around Petersburg, Novgorod and Kiev. They were projector and camera all-in-one and far more mobile than the trains or steamers (Tode 2008: 152).

3 We Shoot Today and Show Tomorrow! Medvedkin's Film Train (kinopoezd) in the 1930s

Aleksandr Medvedkin has been regarded as a famous man, whose films were virtually unknown (Deriabin 2000 and Izvolov 2000). Most of what we

know about Medvedkin's Film Train today, we know from his own writings and interviews, his memoirs and articles (Medvedkin 1985). Although he had received medals for his accomplishments in the film industry most of his films were shelved for many years. In the 1960s he was rediscovered in Russia, but is mostly known in the West from Chris Marker's documentary *Le tombeau d'Alexandre / The Last Bolshevik* (Chris Marker, 1993, France). Actually this was not Marker's first portrait of the filmmaker; in 1971 he had made a short documentary with the title *Le train en marche/ The Train Rolls On* (Chris Marker, 1971, France) to accompany the release of Medvedkin's film *Schast'e / Happiness* (Aleksandr Medvedkin, 1934, USSR) in France. In this 30-minute film, we can observe the 70-year old Russian director on a solitary railway site in Paris talking about the spirit of optimism in the early years following the revolution. His enthusiasm is undiminished after many years, and he still seems convinced of his former mission. Above all, it was the personal encounter with the people which sparked his interest. He was occupied with the question: What does the Russian peasant dream of? Films like *Schast'e* reveal his profound interest with that topic. Marker gives Medvedkin freedom to tell his story without being interrupted by critical comments or questions. We hear from the contemporary how the kinopoezd came into life, how much Medvedkin learned while being on it, his journeys and the problems he encountered. The political situation was tense because two of Stalin's main projects were not as successful as he had hoped for: the collectivisation and the first five-year-plan (1928-1932). Only in his later film would Marker tackle the issue of personal responsibility in the late 1920s, when Stalin's terror regime was tangible.

Marker was not the only one to point out how Medvedkin's life story (1900-1989) echoes the story of the "Soviet dream itself". Emma Widdis explores this thought further:

Medvedkin's career, and his life, run in parallel with the life and death of the USSR, and mirror

the complexities and moral ambiguities of that ill-fated experiment. His major works stand as testament to the tensions and creativity of the years between 1917 and 1940, at once conforming to the political imperatives of the age and subverting them. His creative life is emblematic of the difficult trajectory of an artist committed to that most capricious of regimes (Widdis 2005: 1).

Medvedkin joined the Studio Gosvoenkino in 1927 after having served in the Red Army. He was still working in the Central Studio for Documentary Films in Moscow practically up until his death in 1989. The director had a fighting spirit and considered cinema "a weapon of attack, an offensive weapon in the battle against evil, wherever it originates and however limited our resources for that battle are" (Taylor and Christie 1988: 165), and saw himself in a battle against pre-revolutionary films:

As a warrior, a soldier in a victorious army and a political activist who was used to dealing with the education of Red Army soldiers, I entered cinema in order to attack this kind of film, to defeat it and to arm cinema with the new, rich political genre of satire (ibid.: 167).



Fig. 13: Still from Dziga Vertov's *Kinopravda No. 9*, 1922, courtesy of Austrian Film Museum, Vienna / Georg Wasner.

Medvedkin had started in theatre, where he used the grotesque, clowning, burlesque, comedy, circus or farce to educate the illiterate audience. He then

went on to making one reelers, which were soon criticised by the Party officials, but Lunacharskii spoke up for him and made sure he could continue making films. Medvedkin did not like to use musical accompaniment and produced newsreels from documentary materials. Finally the director developed his concept of the Film Train:

It was in this light that I decided that I could make films on the film train. I decided to build a team from scratch, equip three railway carriages and travel on wheels whenever there was something wrong. This was a kind of special fire brigade to put out problem fires. Wherever there was something amiss, like the plan was not being fulfilled, wherever there was bad management, there our train went, gathered information and filmed. So much has been written about the train since then but it has all missed the point. It was a kind of public prosecutor's cinema (ibid.: 169).

The first "film factory on reels" left the station in the night in January 18/19, 1932, and was in existence for three years without a definitive end date. The destination of this first expedition was the Ukrainian mining region Dnepropetrovsk, with the aim of improving the efficiency of the industrial transportation systems and looking into problems with the poor organisation in the factories responsible for servicing railway engines (Widdis 2005: 24).

The train was financed by the political administration throughout 1932 and subject to the command of the Propaganda section of the Party (ibid.: 23). The train consisted of three old, renovated cars, which provided a laboratory, editing rooms, a print shop, an animation studio, a screening room, a garage and beds for 32 people. According to an often quoted bon mot, everyone had only 1m² at his disposal. However, it turned out to be a very productive undertaking: Widdis provides us with the statistics and writes that it lasted three months, produced nine films and served 35,300 viewers with a total of 105 screenings (ibid.). And yet, the follow-

ing journeys produced even more films in shorter time; for example, according to Widdis, the second trip in 1932 to the Krivoi Rog mining region yielded 21 completed pictures in two months, during which they also worked closer with the local newspapers and a greater number of workers. This was the result of Medvedkin's careful planning, where both film and paper worked on par with each other enabling the train to become a "multi-levelled agitator". He wrote: "Anything that was difficult to capture on film we would hit with print, and, in a situation where pamphlets were already proving useless, the combined editorial team tackled the material on screen" (ibid.: 25).

The train gradually expanded until, in the year 1934, there were five cars travelling with a team of 59 people. They had the capacity to process 2,000 metres of film every day on the train, whether it was stationary or in motion. Altogether 25,000 meters of film were produced. Medvedkin and his team worked around the clock: "They were eight cameramen: they did all the shooting for these films. I put them together, approved the script. I was in charge: I was the scriptwriter and the chief director and I had four or five directors under me. They were all crowded together, terribly crowded, a group of enthusiasts and romantics." (Taylor and Christie 1988: 169). It seems ironic that the director's enthusiastic work was basically ignored by both the heads of his studio, the Soiuzkinoekhranika, and the press. Nevertheless he regards the Film Train as a highly successful and effective project, at least in retrospect. His main goal was to show the key to the problems of the first five-year-plan such as bread, coal, metal and transport, using satirical comedy just like he had done in his theatre days. The journeys took them to the Ukraine, to Siberia, along the Kuban River, and everywhere they came across the same thing: "people who had joined the kolkhoz thinking they'd get everything they wanted straight away." (Widdis 2005: 172). The first six journeys were already made in the first year between January 1932 and January 1933. A total of twelve journeys were undertaken, headed at first by Medvedkin and later Iakov Bliokh.

116 films were made, of which only a quarter (28) have survived until today (Deriabin 2000).



Fig. 14: Still from Dziga Vertov's *Kinopravda No. 9*, 1922, courtesy of Austrian Film Museum, Vienna / Georg Wasner.

The idea to use film to correct “everything that was wrong” has been one of the things which clearly distinguished Medvedkin’s approach and method from the agit-trains ten years earlier. The population should neither be entertained nor supported morally, but actually see their own crimes against the Soviet State and their fellow man, and be punished in public:

We used the technique and genre of newsreel as the occasion to raise the great issue of construction on the screen in a very relevant manner and in various genres. It was rather like the prosecutor’s speech in a courtroom: it showed what was wrong on screen. It painted a nasty picture, some problem that had not been put right, and this was always accompanied by the title, “What are you doing, dear comrades, what are you doing?” This was followed by a fearless presentation of problems: a “document”, a “film document”, a newsreel (Taylor and Christie 1985: 169).

One cannot help but picture Medvedkin and his team as “cinema-crusaders”, who would not leave until the dirty work was done, and with the aid of their films, “the tide had turned and everything that was wrong had been eliminated” (ibid.: 170). Along the same lines Widdis argues, that Medved-

kin clearly “envisaged films as a direct participant in the construction of the new regime”, where cinema can be “a very real weapon in the Party cells, in concrete areas of socialist construction” (Widdis 2005: 22). Poor workers should not only recognise themselves on the screen, but be exposed to public recognition and shame. The director was very proud of the heated arguments, which would occur after the screenings (ibid.: 29), thus stimulating a dialogue between what was demonstrated on the screen and a better way towards solving the problems via the cinematic shock. As well as being the focus of the agitation, film production was understood as a local endeavour, and sought to interfere directly into the reality of the communities Medvedkin visited. He wrote: “The principal difference between the film-train and other film factories is that the production of a film is organically and intrinsically linked to its screening in the place of production.” (Widdis 2005: 25). Simultaneously, the camera intervenes directly in everyday life, in Medvedkin’s understanding it is not hidden, but clearly has a self-conscious presence. Although the director emphasized the local significance, he was not content with the press coverage of this project. For him “the train was a phenomenon of national significance, and should be recognised as such in the central press” (ibid.: 33). Yet, few of the films went on national release, which, as Widdis argues, might be due to Medvedkin revealing the flaws of the perfect socialist world by striving for an honest portrayal of reality (ibid.: 34).

4 The World with the Eye of Millions: Vertov and Medvedkin in the Age of the Internet

Writing in 1922, the critic and art theorist Boris Arvatov considered agitation first of all as an instrument for the transformation of reality. Agitational cinema should not consist of mere phantoms populating the screen, which Maksim Gor’kii had observed in Nizh-

nii Novgorod in 1896 (Taylor and Christie 1988: 25). For Arvatov it was more important to tell stories of real people and things behind “those shadows”. He once even stated: “The question with agitation is not a question of which ideology one agitates for, but about the methods used to agitate.” (Arvatov 1922). Thus Arvatov regarded experimental cinema as essential for political agitation and declared:

To the exerting of influence and the showing of life we should add demonstration which transforms daily life, a kind of laboratory, passed through film montage, of new forms which are being invented now (clothes, architecture, furniture, gestures, and so forth) (Arvatov 2004: 132).

As a side note we should mention that Arvatov has criticised Vertov for his strict refusal to make feature films, although we would consider Vertov’s films today rather experimental.

If we wanted to pose the question of how Vertov or Medvedkin would have used the internet as a new tool to agitate – or (more positively phrased) to disseminate and educate – we would find many clues to work out a possible answer. Several concepts forward can be seen as recurring topics in Vertov’s writings as well as Medvedkin’s statements. They link the visions of these communist filmmakers and what tried to achieve in their work to the possibilities of the internet: technical progress, news in real time, mobility, interactivity and accessibility. Filmmakers have to be aware of new developments in their field, and mostly are. Vertov is no exception, and even more so his cameraman and brother Mikhail Kaufman with whom he frequently experimented with new cameras or new lenses. Vertov also embraced the arrival of sound film wholeheartedly and dreamed about a documentary “radio-newspaper”, about tele- and radio-films and voted for the “organization of a visual and radio broadcasting station, a visual-acoustic central station” (Vertov 1984c: 105). Rudolf Arnheim, then working as a film critic for *Die Weltbühne*, recalls a talk with Vertov about his first sound film *Entuziazm*

(*Simfoniia Donbasa*) / *Enthusiasm: Symphony of the Donbass* (Dziga Vertov, 1930, USSR), in which the Soviet director partly prefigures 3D-cinema:

Vertov told me lately in a conversation that ideally he would have in mind a kind of sculptural film, which is no longer localised on the flat cinema screen, but whose protagonists seem to run – or literally do run – into the audience (Arnheim 1931).

Widdis argues that Medvedkin’s *Film Train* had also been an answer to the question of how to communicate with the masses: to show them their reality on the screen, to teach them through self-identification. “The familiar environment of communities”, she writes, “was transformed into a cinematic category. During the first trip, for example, Medvedkin developed an animated camel, which could be superimposed onto films to symbolize shame.” (Widdis 2003: 43). To her, Medvedkin presents himself as a young man who is preoccupied with communication in all its forms, on a quest for new forms of cinematic language (Widdis 2005: 22).

Both Vertov and Medvedkin were preoccupied with trying to find new forms of engaging the audience in the cinematic experience and both claimed that there was no existing film language they could use. Their genre of choice was initially the documentary, a form Medvedkin would eventually leave in order to make feature films and to develop his comic approach further. Both stressed the involvement of the local community (in Medvedkin’s case) or the viewer generally (in Vertov’s case) in the production of films. Perhaps we can see Vertov here as the more radical thinker, who not only wanted to show his audience on the screen, but envisioned a system of film-reporters who would produce their own images and share them with the world.

In this sense Vertov and Medvedkin can be seen as predecessors of TV or Online-Journalism – to shoot, process and project the images as fast as possible: “12 Minutes-Project of mobile film projection unit. Only 12 minutes transpire from the arrival time at the show location to the beginning of

the screening.” (Österreichisches Filmmuseum, Tode and Wurm 2006: 84).

Another idea that Vertov nourished continuously was that of establishing a footage library, which could be used by everyone who was willing to work in accordance with his kinoglaz-theory. Material would arrive from all over, coming from a “humanity of kinoks”. One of Vertov’s earliest ideas was to create an army of “film scouts” in order to abandon single authorship and proceed to mass authorship, “not a coincidental but rather a necessary and all-encompassing global review of the world every few hour” (ibid.: 86). Mobility, interactivity and accessibility are the key-terms to describe this way of working, and would also describe the internet fairly well. Vertov spoke of a “negative of time”, the “possibility of seeing without boundaries and without distances” and even of a “remote control of the camera” (ibid.: 85). Simultaneously, it was one of the biggest problems for Vertov to find a way “to tear down the boundaries between the film and its audience” (ibid.: 108). MacKay argues also along these lines:

Vertov believes that media technology itself, properly deployed, could undo that social inertia and generate the New: by connecting, on an experimental and intellectual level, subjects normally dispersed and alienated; by exposing the contingent and limited character of fictional conventions relative to what technologies of representations are capable of; and even by altering the circuitry of human perception as such, by finding ways to bring to it the (for Vertov) superhuman perceptual powers of the mediating technology, and specifically of cinema (MacKay 2015).

In contemporary society many people receive their news over the Internet and they value the fact that they can read and watch them nearly in real time, wherever they want and whenever they want. In addition to that, more eyes and voices contribute to a multifaceted report rather than a one-dimensional one. This is an essentially democratic approach, in

contradiction to the image of Dziga Vertov as a hard-core communist filmmaker, whose primary goal was supposedly only agitational work in the sense of the Party.

Bio

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Dr. Adelheid Heftberger is a researcher and curator at the Austrian Film Museum in Vienna, where her projects are concerned with databases and metadata structure, online publications and DVD-publications. Before that she has been a key researcher in the interdisciplinary project *Digital Formalism* (2007-2010). She holds a PhD in Slavic Studies as well as a MA in Comparative Studies from the University of Innsbruck, and has published about the visualization of filmic structure in the work of Dziga Vertov and archival topics.

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