

SOVIET POWER AND THE MEDIA

The rhetoric surrounding the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 not only linked that revolution to an ambitious project of changing Russia's communications network, it virtually identified Soviet power with the power of media networks. As the leader of the revolution, Vladimir Il'ich Lenin, wrote in 1918, "socialism without the postal service, the telegraph [...] [is] nothing but empty words."¹ We want to organize an international, inter-disciplinary conference—provisionally titled "Soviet Power and the Media"—that would look more closely at the relationship between Soviet power and media technologies such as writing; the railways; the telephone; radio, and the telegraph.

The fact that media such as the railways and the telegraph played a vital role in the Revolution that overturned the tsarist regime in Russia is a well-known fact. However, traditional investigations of the relationship between the media and Soviet power have frequently assumed that media technologies merely helped disseminate and/or give representation to a revolutionary message that remained essentially unaffected by them. While in some sense this was no doubt the case, the question could also be asked if such media, rather than merely lending representation or articulation to a political force that preexisted them did not in fact variously help to construct that force, so that Soviet power would not have looked the same without them.

The questions we want to raise with our conference concern political history in the Soviet Union and the history of the media alike. Broadly speaking we want to focus on the intersection of political power, revolution, art, and (media) technologies between

¹ "Socializm bez pochty, telegrafa [...] – pusteishaya fraza." (Vladimir Il'ich Lenin, *Sochineniya*, vol. 27, p. 278)

the 1917 Bolshevik revolution and Stalin's death in 1953. How were media such as the telephone and the telegraph instrumental in establishing Soviet power? How did the propaganda trains of the post-revolutionary era contribute not only to the diffusion of the revolutionary message but, in a sense, to its very articulation? How did the telegraph and the railways impact Bolshevik tactics during the civil war? How did the medium of film contribute towards an understanding of the confluence of art and politics? In what way did the radio with its construction of a fantasmatic community (audience) of listeners compete with the more traditional media technology of the book (writing)? Which role did the media play in the disciplining of the Soviet work force? On what level did media technologies contribute to the formation of the Soviet subject, both on the level of the individual and the collective? These are some of the questions the proposed conference will address.

During the 1920s, poets such as Velimir Khlebnikov ("Radio Poem"), Vladimir Mayakovskij ("Pro eto"; "Oblako v shtanax"; ...) and others orchestrated a multi-faceted media discourse that focused on the relationship between the most traditional of recording media—writing—and those media technologies that Lenin had declared central for the establishment of *sovetskaja vlast'*. In the writings of Khlebnikov and Mayakovsky the radio especially figures as the magical vehicle of a quasi-mythical direct oral communication that ideally eschews the pitfalls of media and material signs alike.

However, these and other media-fictions, with their tendency to subsume media technologies under the poets' desire to establish a type of communication that transcends all materially concrete media represents only one side of the picture. In the work of constructivist filmmakers such as Dziga Vertov and Sergej Eisenshtein and visual artists

such as El Lissitzky, media technologies were not sublimated or bracketed for the sake of direct sign- and medium-less communication, they were on the contrary radically de-sublimated and de-habitualized. In Dziga Vertov's film *The Man With The Movie Camera* (1929), for instance, the camera that shoots the film takes, in a certain sense, the position of the main protagonist. To the constructivist avantgarde, media such as film and photography served multiple functions. First, they served as links between engineering and art, linking constructivist artistic practice with the realm of science and experimentation. Second, they served as a form of technologically armed politics, enabling art to evolve from being a tool for the representation of reality to being an instrument for its analysis. Third, as instruments of analysis, film and photography especially serve as links between the avantgarde with the experiment culture of science, especially with 19th-century psychotechnics and Soviet reflexology (Bekhterev, Pavlov).

The tension between de-sublimation and sublimation, between the enthusiasm for progress, technological development and network power, on the one hand, and the urge to transcend the materiality of the media in search for direct, un-mediated communication, on the other, structures the Soviet attitude towards the media at all levels. On the one hand, Stalinism promoted Stalin and the party as a medium beyond all media, a universal transmitter of truth whose medium was in a sense the Soviet ether itself. At the same time, media networks such as the railways, the canal system, the electricity grid, and the network of labor camps (Gulag) were continuously being expanded. Additionally, Stalinist propaganda developed an entire "alternative" media history, the history of interplanetary travel and the cosmic expansion of socialism into space. As a medium, space travel—whose virtues were expounded in literature, film, and the visual arts—is a

fantasmatic medium that represents less existing networks than imaginary extensions of such networks.

The conference we propose will not limit itself to the description of Soviet media networks, it also aims to describe and analyze the function such networks fulfilled in the expansion, and administration, and execution of Soviet power. During the 1930s media networks served, among other things, as disciplining mechanisms with a broad social application. As the historian Peter Holquist has recently explained, in the late 1920s, the Soviet State Archives in Moscow were required to establish multiple card indexes supplemented by a host of sophisticated finding tools that allowed the secret police to *systematically* track down suspects. In the Soviet Union, then, media such as writing and office technologies such as the typewriter or the card index were never simply neutral, objectifying recording instruments. Instead they were instruments that helped the authorities in telling friends from enemies.

A different example of the disciplining power of media networks during Stalinism (other than the *Gulag* itself) is the Moscow subway whose construction was begun in the early 1930s. The subway—one of the most propagandized exploits of Soviet urban engineering—must not only be seen as a transport medium that helped improve urban infrastructure, nor should it simply be viewed as the takeover, in symbolic terms, of the underworld by the Soviet state. As a media network, the Moscow subway also fulfilled a crucial disciplining function: It systematically trained hundreds of thousands of Soviet citizens to discipline themselves both collectively and individually in a networked urban environment.

If this example goes to illustrate how the media functioned as control mechanisms on a variety of different levels (military, social, economic, aesthetic), it leaves open the important question as to how the media might themselves be subject to control. Indeed, to the Soviet leaders, control *over* the media was as important as control *by* them. If on one level the technical media aligned themselves seamlessly with a view of the Soviet State as a perfectly adjusted machine, on another, they appeared as specters that haunted the very mechanism they helped create. Media not only aided Soviet power, they also represented a (potential) threat to it and, as such, they needed to be contained at all cost. During the “Ne boltaj!” (“Do Not Chatter!”) campaign of the late 1940s, Soviet propaganda posters urged citizens to use the telephone only very cautiously as the enemy might always be listening in. The “Ne boltaj!” campaign is an example of an effort to impose discipline on collective media use, but it is also an example of how one medium (poster art) was instrumentalized to help contain and control another (the telephone).

The “Ne boltaj!” campaign is an example of how the control of communication under Stalin frequently manifested itself as control *through* communication. We want to pay particular attention to the Stalinist media fictions, i.e., fictionalized representations of media technologies in film and literature. For instance, late Stalinist propaganda films such as *Kljatwa* (1949) feature a surprising quantity of scenes involving long-distance communication by telephone or telefax. Apart from demonstrating the power of Soviet media networks, such scenes also serve to articulate and establish by visual means a code of behavior for the responsible use of such media, a code whose regulating power reaches from body posture to vocal intonation.

II. Participants (preliminary):

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III. Preliminary Program

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