

# Medvedkin and the invention of television

Chris Marker

A necessary caution: the ‘democratization of tools’ entails many financial and technical constraints, and does not save us from the necessity of work. Owning a DV camera does not magically confer talent on someone who doesn’t have any or who is too lazy to ask himself if he has any. You can miniaturize as much as you want, but a film will always require a great deal of work –and a reason to do it. That was the whole story of the Medvedkin groups, the young workers who, in the post-’68 era, tried to make short films about their own lives, and whom we tried to help on the technical level, with the means of the time. How they complained! ‘We come home from work and you ask us to work some more. . . .’ But they stuck with it, and you have to believe that something happened there, because 30 years later we saw them present their films at the Belfort festival, in front of an attentive audience. The means of the time was 16mm silent, which meant three-minute camera rolls, a laboratory, an editing table, some way of adding sound –everything that you have now right inside a little case that fits in your hand. A little lesson in modesty for the spoiled children of today, just like the spoiled children of 1970 got their lesson in modesty by putting themselves under the patronage of Alexander Ivanovitch Medvedkin and his ciné-train. For the benefit of the younger generation, Medvedkin was a Russian filmmaker who, in 1936 and with the means that were proper to his time (35mm film, editing table, and film lab installed in the train), essentially invented television: shoot during the day, print and edit at night, show it the next day to the people you filmed (and who often participated in the editing). I think that it’s this fabled and long forgotten bit of history (Medvedkin isn’t even mentioned in Georges Sadoul’s book, considered in its day the Soviet Cinema bible) that underlies a large part of my work –in the end, perhaps, the only coherent part. To try to give the power of speech to people who don’t have it, and, when it’s possible, to help them find their own means of expression. The workers I filmed in 1967 in Rhodesia, just like the Kosovars I filmed in 2000, had never been heard on television: everyone was speaking on their behalf, but once you no longer saw them on the road, bloody and sobbing, people lost interest in them. To my great surprise, I once found myself explaining the editing of *Battleship Potemkin* to a group of aspiring filmmakers in Guinea-Bissau, using an old print on rusty reels; now those filmmakers are having their films selected

for competition in Venice (keep an eye out for the next musical by Flora Gomes). I found the Medvedkin syndrome again in a Bosnian refugee camp in 1993 –a bunch of kids who had learned all the techniques of television, with newsreaders and captions, by pirating satellite TV and using equipment supplied by an NGO (nongovernmental organization). But they didn’t copy the dominant language –they just used the codes in order to establish credibility and reclaim the news for other refugees. An exemplary experience. They had the tools and they had the necessity. Both are indispensable.

## Do you prefer television, movies on a big screen, or surfing the Internet?

I have a completely schizophrenic relationship with television. When I’m feeling lonely, I adore it, particularly since there’s been cable. It’s curious how cable offers an entire catalog of antidotes to the poisons of standard TV. If one network shows a ridiculous TV movie about Napoleon, you can flip over to the History Channel to hear Henri Guillermin’s brilliantly mean commentary on it. If a literary program makes us submit to a parade of currently fashionable female monsters, we can change over to Mezzo to contemplate the luminous face of Héléne Grimaud surrounded by her wolves, and it’s as if the others never existed. Now there are moments when I remember I am not alone, and that’s when I fall apart. The exponential growth of stupidity and vulgarity is something that everyone has noticed, but it’s not just a vague sense of disgust –it’s a concrete quantifiable fact (you can measure it by the volume of the cheers that greet the talk-show hosts, which have grown by an alarming number of decibels in the last five years) and a crime against humanity. Not to mention the permanent aggressions against the French language...And since you are exploiting my Russian penchant for confession, I must say the worst: I am allergic to commercials. In the early Sixties, making commercials was perfectly acceptable; now, it’s something that no one will own up to. I can do nothing about it. This manner of placing the mechanism of the lie in the service of praise has always irritated me, even if I have to admit that this diabolical patron has occasionally given us some of the most beautiful images you can see on the small screen (have you seen the David Lynch commercial with the blue lips?). But cynics always betray themselves, and there is a small consolation

in the industry's own terminology: they stop short of calling themselves 'creators,' so they call themselves 'creatives.'

And the movies in all this? For the reasons mentioned above, and under the orders of Jean-Luc, I've said for a long time that films should be seen first in theaters, and that television and video are only there to refresh your memory. Now that I no longer have any time at all to go to the cinema, I've started seeing films by lowering my eyes, with an ever increasing sense of sinfulness (this interview is indeed becoming Dostoevskian). But to tell the truth I no longer watch many films, only those by friends, or curiosities that an American acquaintance tapes for me on TCM. There is too much to see on the news, on the music channels or on the indispensable Animal Channel. And I feed my hunger for fiction with what is by far the most accomplished source: those great American TV series, like *The Practice* inspired a video by David Bowie and a film by Terry Gilliam. And there's also a bar called "La Jetée," in Japan.

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