



“Medvedkine” (essay), in Juan Azulay, Benjamin Rice, Carlo Aiello, eds., *eVolo 5, Architecture Xenoculture* (2013). All footnotes removed in published version.

## MEDVEDKINE



Soviet filmmaking repressed and forgotten other than by remote and distant figures (partisans) who somehow survived the Stalinist purges of the 1930s.<sup>2</sup>

Chris Marker's portrait of Alexandre Medvedkine in the 1993 film *Le tombeau d'Alexandre/The Last Bolshevik* is highly instructive of his own relationship to Soviet cinema. Most especially, this difficult or troubled rapport with the antecedents to *cinéma vérité* in the West (and its protean formal properties, in terms of structure and often satirical-critical commentary) comes forth in the figures he assembles to comment upon Medvedkine's life work. When Medvedkine's *Scast'e (Le Bonheur/Happiness)* (1934) leaked to the West (c.1967), sent like an "SOS" in multiple bottles to various film archives (one by one from deep within the Soviet film world), Marker and SLON received a copy by way of Jacques Ledoux (curator of the Cinémathèque Royale de Belgique, in Belgium)<sup>1</sup>. The film opened the floodgates of a retrospective survey of

Image (above) – Chris Marker, *Alexandre Medvedkine*, n.d. Image courtesy of Galerie de France, 2008.

Marker's *The Last Bolshevik*<sup>3</sup> is comprised of a series of six letters addressed to Medvedkine.<sup>4</sup> Letter One surveys Medvedkine's early years (he is 17 years old at the time of the October Revolution, a member of the Red Cavalry in 1919 (during the Civil War), moves from theatrical/vaudevillian productions for the Red Army (mid-Civil War) to cinema in the late 1920s, making 18-to-20-minute films in the "people's cinema" movement,<sup>5</sup> and begins the cine-train experiment (c.1930), making rather caustic and toxic films for one year documenting the broken industrial facilities and dysfunctional collectivized farms of the post-WWI Soviet Union, traveling the country with a young and idealistic cadre of "true communists" (that includes actors from Vsevolod Meyerhold's theater company). Letter Two details the shift from post-Civil War Russia to Stalin's campaigns to re-build the State's crumbling infrastructure, rationalize its agricultural production, and re-propagandize all forms of culture in the process. Dziga Vertov appears in Letter Two as the progenitor of the Soviet documentary film that captures "life as it is" ("Kino-Pravda" or "Film Truth") versus the more popular, fictionalized nature of cinema (as fantasy and/or escapism). This recourse to the hard facts, however, is notably and repeatedly undermined by the sheer brutality of those facts. Although the films produced by the cine-train were considered lost in 1932, as many as nine were found (by Nikolai Izvolov) and those subsequently released are exceptionally excoriating. Medvedkine and Company show in sardonic, black-and-white portraits the decrepitude of the factories, mines, and collective farms of the era. *Watch Your Health!* is the least daunting in this regard, even if it documents the lack of hygiene in the Red Army and in one particular case shows half a platoon disappearing (by slow dissolve) as they cross a ridge (implying the cost of disease and poor hygiene). *Journal No. 4* documents a locomotive repair depot and the corruption of the bosses and the absenteeism and carelessness of the workers against a clipped and stylized presentation of the woes of everyday life on the Soviet plant.<sup>6</sup> A workers' tribunal is seen with its attendant standoff between managers and workers, a committee meets, drafts a report, and files it away ... The film, in fact, documents the industrial shambles, and Medvedkine's camera is subtly and suitably merciless. *How Do You Live Comrade Miner?* is perhaps the bleakest of the trio of films circulated, with its survey of the "Grand Mine October" (where 1500 workers toil for a salary of 300-400 rubles, living en masse, singly and/or with their families, in barracks-style quarters, three to a bed, and with mattresses that lack straw because the quartermaster has "forgotten" to provide it). Medvedkine at one point shows the tattered clothes of the workers and contrasts them with the pinstriped suits of the bosses, which nonetheless also have holes in the seat of the pants from endless hours sitting around debating, producing charts, plans, and reports ... The absurd nature of much of the films accounts for the fact that they were "lost" (or buried in the archives of the regime). They also attest to Medvedkine's secret and often-repressed artistic side, insofar as the more avant-garde aspects of Russian art from the 1920s never quite go away. Marker at one point early on describes how the highest expressions of Russian avant-garde art in the 1920s were ultimately no different than the Socialist-Realist work (canonized by Gorky at the Congress of Writers in 1934) that accompanied it and eventually took over. In the former case, he states, the artists were just that much more intelligent. In both cases, however, Art itself was quite simply reduced to propaganda – depicting the race toward the "New Man."<sup>7</sup>

Medvedkine came from at least three generations of peasants. He fought for the ideals of the Revolution and never changed his mind, even as he negotiated the ravages of Stalin's regime. His films generally ended up shelved and/or destroyed, and the appearance of *Happiness* is all the more instructive given its silent-movie-like, Chaplin-esque qualities. Pure satire, Marker notes that it in fact documents many of the same events and miseries found during the cine-train years. Medvedkine is presented as a "true communist" in a world of make-believe communists, where reality is always staged to cover over the grim reality of the totalitarian state.<sup>8</sup> Like Meyerhold, Isaac Babel, and Vertov, he is presented as a tragic figure at the forefront and then edge of the birth of cinema.<sup>9</sup> Meyerhold famously incorporated Vertov's short films into many of his experimental theatrical works (and both Meyerhold and Vertov ended up dead by the early 1950s, Meyerhold shot during the purges and Vertov dying effectively of a broken heart). Marker spares no sarcasm for the retrospective, post-Stalin re-workings of Soviet history, pointing out that as one works backward through the nightmare of the 20<sup>th</sup> century one also always arrives at the cause for the nightmare – the battle against the combined dynasties of the Romanovs and the Russian Orthodox Church. This sentiment mirrors Daniel Cohn-Bendit's statement regarding the origin of the atrocities of the Baader-Meinhof Gang in Germany (that origin for the cycle of bloodshed being the massive crimes of the Vietnam War era and the complicity of capitalism proper).<sup>10</sup> In the first letter of *The Last Bolshevik*, Medvedkine is said by Lev Rochal (one of Marker's interlocutors) to have changed "one religion for another" (or, Medvedkine's early years, when he was steeped in that unique Russian religiosity that favors naturalism over supernaturalism, naturally evolved toward the religion of godless communism, as in post-war France and elsewhere many former Catholic priests and clerics became Marxists).<sup>11</sup> Rochal states that "a believer takes to new ideals [...] to bring happiness to all mankind."<sup>12</sup> This shift underscores the hidden "religious" dimension (the redemptive praxis at the heart of communism), directly and indirectly explaining the unrepentant "communism" of the true believers. Medvedkine and Vertov are such souls (even as Marker shows that their attempts to maneuver within the apparatus of the Soviet state led them to inexplicable and often-damning compromises with power). The often-cited remark from *The Last Bolshevik* that this world is an endless war and the artist must choose sides (attributed to Roman Karmen) suggests Marker's own allegiance to the "cause" (which is always the same cause).<sup>13</sup> *The Last Bolshevik* approaches closure with Marker visiting Medvedkine's grave. He has died on the threshold of *perestroika*, and he has died (Marker suggests) thinking that perhaps, after all, everything was not in vain.<sup>14</sup> Marker uses one other figure to remarkable effect in this regard – and it is another nod toward the tragedy of the Soviet Union. This figure is Yakov Tolchan (a near exact contemporary of Medvedkine), and another survivor (but just barely). Tolchan worked with Vertov, as cameraman, as early as 1926 (and Tolchan's heart is broken as well). He has given up all interest in anything other than music.<sup>15</sup> Tolchan, Vertov, and Medvedkine are "dinosaurs" – remnants of a "lost" time. Marker shows a young girl cuddling a toy dinosaur as the credits come up, stating that yet some still find them adorable ... One wonders, then, who is the "last Bolshevik."<sup>16</sup>

Marker uses contemporary film scholars, plus the filmmaker Marina Goldovskaya, brilliantly (and foremost) to underscore the "rebirth" of interest in this almost forgotten genius of early Soviet cinema (inclusive of all of the problems of Medvedkine's cyclical capitulation to Stalinism).<sup>17</sup> Yet Medvedkine's rebirth accompanies, oddly, the collapse of the Soviet state, suggesting Karl Marx's prescient prediction that true communism would one day emerge from the "highest" (though not necessarily most ethical or humanistic) form of capitalism. The darkness pervading this film is an indictment of the various apparatuses of corrupted power (of the paradigmatic in service to ideology at the expense of everything and anything else), a critique that is no less appropriate to the conditions on the ground in 1993, with the so-called triumph of neoliberal capitalism, when the film was made.<sup>18</sup> This darkness is a form of pessimism that dovetails with Dostoyevskian pessimism – and the various martyrdoms along the path of the film are testimonials to the fact that the Revolution is always already to come. This "to come" (*à venir*) seems, today, to be a proprietary gesture of French criticism proper (Marxist and otherwise). Marker's politics is neither Bukharinite nor Trotskyite. What obtains within his appropriations of "Russia" is that peculiar tragic chord that runs through its entire history. The last scene from Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov* is used to superlative effect by Marker when coupled with resignation in the face of the endless cooptation of the Revolution by the forces of repression. The scene marshaled to portray this centuries-long historical tragedy is when a simpleton/*muzhik* (on his knees) weeps "for Russia," as the opera based on Pushkin's tale heads ("offstage") toward yet another phase of usurpation and suffering (power plays coupled with renewed poverty and repression) ... What emerges in this powerful survey of the "Russian tragedy" is the concurrent power of Art proper in its relation to power. Marker's privileging of literature (as "untimely" speculative intelligence) is no less problematic, in this sense, as it is equally given to the distortions that roiled Soviet avant-garde art from the early 1900s up till its suppression in the 1930s by Stalin and the summary verdicts visited upon many of its key progenitors. The main ingredient remains, however, the utopian-

spiritual nexus of the representational dynamic of art in its torsion with the here-and-now. Marker's own work over the years between the late 1940s and the early 1990s is in many ways a mirror for this larger, century-long tragedy. His recourse to highly nuanced narrativity sides with his privileging of literature over the visual arts, something that effectively hides out in his own visual-exegetical works. If in *The Last Bolshevik* he famously proclaims that his task is to "question images," that task also involves questioning his own use of the visual spectrum of knowledge in relation to what truly interests him – that is, the non-discursive (yet verbal-iconic) apparatuses of political agency and their incorporation and/or deformation in cultural production through political praxis, the latter (or the deformation of non-discursive knowledge) occurring with the unholy alliance between spectral ideology and the spectral-utopian plurisignation given to Art.<sup>19</sup>

In the last letter we are treated to a one last revelation about Medvedkine's dance with Stalin in the form of a rather innocuous May Day 1939 film entitled *Blossoming Youth*, a purely propagandistic piece of non-sense produced in the heyday of the purges, and – Marker announces dramatically – *directed by Alexandre Medvedkine*.<sup>20</sup> This last revelation, while damning, has been foreshadowed earlier in one of the most beautiful scenes of the film. Early on in the first letter, Marker is inside a Russian Orthodox church (clearly post-*perestroika*) and noting the icons on the walls, but also the living icons or the faces in the group assembled listening to the holy liturgy – that is, surveying the post-communist human "presence." It is at this point that he recalls an old adage, "Use a long spoon to sup with the devil." It is served up under cover of questions regarding how far the Metropolitan of the Church went in collaborating with the Soviet regime – *how far*, he intones, not whether or not he did so. But this is then followed by a rhetorical question addressed directly to Medvedkine (and by association to all of his ill-fated fellow travelers in the world of Soviet agit-prop art: "Did you wear out your lives calculating the length of the spoon, only to discover there was no supper?")

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<sup>1</sup> Ledoux famously appeared in Marker's seminal 1962 film *La jeteé* as the principal inquisitor. "It all began in Brussels' Film Library ('Cinémathèque Royale') when my friend Jacques Ledoux, the flamboyant conservator, received a package of brand new prints from Moscow. In it, classics like Eisenstein, connoisseurs choice like Barnet, and one totally unknown: *Schastye* (Happiness) by A.I. Medvedkin. Ledoux hadn't ordered it, he didn't even know the man's name. Apparently, one hidden hand had thrown that bottle to the sea of Cinémathèques, hoping for a welcoming creek." Chris Marker, "The Last Bolshevik," <http://www.chrismarker.org/the-last-bolshevik-by-chris-marker/> (accessed 02/16/2012). Previous to Medvedkine's re-discovery in France in the late 1960s, the only mention in the West of his works had appeared in Jay Leyda's *Kino: A History of the Russian and Soviet Film* (New York: Collier, 1960). Leyda was in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, studying film, and worked with Eisenstein. He migrated in 1936 to the Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York, and published *Eisenstein at Work* (co-authored by Zina Voynow) in 1982.

<sup>2</sup> Originally made as a "silent" film, *Happiness* was restored and given a new soundtrack, with music by Mussorgsky, by SLON in 1971, when the Soviets granted permission for its release in France. SLON (Société pour le Lancement des Oeuvres Nouvelles/Society for the Advancement of New Works) was the cooperative Marker helped found in Paris in the late 1960s. It produced short films documenting worker movements in France and political insurrections abroad. SLON's first film, *Loin du Viêt-nam/Far from Vietnam* (1967), directed by Joris Ivens and produced by Marker, was comprised of short segments by key Marker allies, including Alain Resnais, Claude Lelouch, William Klein, and Jean-Luc Godard. For a portrait of this film collaborative, see Min Lee, "Red Skies: Joining Forces with the Militant Collective SLON," in "Around the World with Chris Marker, Part II: Time Regained," *Film Comment* 39, no. 4 (July-August 2003): pp. 38-41. Among the small groups that formed within SLON to make films (and Marker says there were perhaps 12 members), Groupe Medvedkine was formed especially to film the strikes at Besançon in December 1967. See Marker, "The Last Bolshevik." There is a sense within Marker's sketch of the origins of SLON, and subsequent connections made between the Soviet Union and France, that Medvedkine's "rebirth" in Russia was a result of the fact that he had developed a fan club in the West, of which Marker was its foremost member. Medvedkine is permitted to travel to France in 1971, under cover of a film project on ecology. This trip facilitates SLON's short film, with Medvedkine as star, on the ciné-trains, *Le train en marche/The Train Rolls On* (1971). It would seem that Medvedkine's rise in the West was also the cause of his receiving the Lenin Prize in 1971, in the East ...

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<sup>3</sup> Alexandre Medvedkine, *Happiness/The Last Bolshevik*, DVD (New York: Icarus Films, 2009). DVD 1: *Happiness* (1934/1971); the ciné-train short films *Watch Your Health!*, *Journal No. 4*, *How Do You Live Comrade Miner?*, *The Conveyor Belt*; the Medvedkine monologue (extract) from Marker/SLON's *The Train Rolls On* (1971); and two recreations by Nikolai Izvolov of Medvedkine's lost films, *Stop Thief!* and *The Story of Titus*. DVD 2: *The Last Bolshevik* (1993); and "Medvedkin and Dziga Vertov," a six-minute segment by Izvolov excised from the edited version. See Emma Widdis, "Happiness," in *Alexander Medvedkin* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005), pp. 35-56. *Happiness* is a film-parable that follows the adventures and "transformation of [idiot-savant] Khmyr from labouring peasant before the Revolution into a layabout 'idler' in the collective farm" of the post-Revolutionary USSR. *Ibid.*, p. 55. The full title of the 1971 French/SLON version of the film is *Le bonheur: Ou l'histoire de l'infortuné Khmyr, de sa femme-cheval Anna, de son opulent voisin Foka au dernier kolkhozien fainéant/Happiness: Or the Story of the Unfortunate Khmyr, His Horse-Wife Anna, His Wealthy Neighbour Foka, to the Last Lazy Kolkhozian*. Jacques Rancière states that Marker's *The Last Bolshevik* engages three "Russias": pre-revolutionary Tsarist Russia; the formation and collapse of the Soviet Union; and the unhappy aftermath. See Oliver Davis, "Art and Aesthetics," in *Jacques Rancière* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), p. 148. See also Jacques Rancière, "La fiction de mémoire: À propos du *Tombeau d'Alexandre* de Chris Marker," *Trafic* 29 (Spring 1999): pp. 36-47. Reprinted and translated into English in Jacques Rancière, *Film Fables* (Oxford: Berg, 2006), pp. 157-70. First published *La fable cinématographique* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2001). Rancière: "The artistic work of memory is that which accords everyone the dignity of fiction." Jacques Rancière, in Marie-Aude Baronian, Mireille Rosello, "Jacques Rancière and Indisciplinarity" (interview with Jacques Rancière), trans. Gregory Elliot, *Art & Research* 2, no. 1 (Summer 2008), <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v2n1/pdfs/jrinterview.pdf> (accessed 02/16/2012).

<sup>4</sup> Letter One covers the period of Medvedkine's life (1900-1989) up to the Civil War in 1919-1920; Letter Two picks up with the move to the production of agit-prop theater and film, with a brief survey of the artistic whirlwinds engulfing post-revolutionary Russia; Letter Three addresses the (mis)adventures of the ciné-train and Medvedkine's implicit naivety and romanticism; Letter Four tracks his travails through the 1930s, with the deaths of Gorky, Meyerhold, and Babel; and Letter Five opens with the Nazi-Soviet pact and quickly devolves into the Minsk campaign (against the Germans), where (utilizing the recurring motif of a porcelain fisherman Medvedkine kept on his bookshelf) Marker notes he is now teaching "fishing to fighters" – filmmaking to soldiers. At the outset of the last (sixth) letter, Marker notes Stalin's death in 1953. (Mockingly and/or surreally, he states that he is in Times Square at the time, hanging out with the blind musician Moondog, and visually implying by montage that he is "watching" the news unfold on some sort of illuminated, electronic billboard, as if a new year, 1953, is being counted down – which is absurd, of course, given that such billboards only arrived much later.) The sixth letter then moves quickly through Medvedkine's receiving of the Lenin Prize in 1971 to his death at the beginning of the end for the Soviet Union. Visiting Medvedkine's grave, Marker hallucinates various images drifting across the face of the glassy surface of the tomb: "Throughout the film, Marker manipulates images, often highlighting detail or even applying computer-generated effects to alter footage. In a particularly reflexive moment, Marker questions his own images as he proposes two imagined endings for the film itself: one of galloping horses superimposed over a graveyard, treated with special effects and music by Alfred Schnittke; the other of Medvedkine's grave again treated with special effects followed by two slow-motion shots of a Red Army cavalry rider with Russian choral music. Marker calls these possible endings 'lyrical' but then notes 'that lyricism was dead,' and the film continues with the fall of communism in Russia. But if lyricism is dead, it is a lyricism associated with the beautiful or the ineffable; it is a lyricism that fails to find the right distance and proper perspective, settling instead for a false proximity." David Foster, "'Thought-Images' and Critical-Lyricisms: The *Denkbild* and Chris Marker's *Le tombeau d'Alexandre*," *Image [&] Narrative* 10, no. 3, Special Issue Chris Marker (I), guest edited by Peter Kravanja (2009), [http://www.kravanja.eu/pdf\\_files/ChrisMarker1.pdf](http://www.kravanja.eu/pdf_files/ChrisMarker1.pdf) (accessed 02/16/2012). Both the fifth letter and the last (sixth) letter indulge the post-*perestroika* meltdown that Russia went through, though it is all rather inconclusive. What is important is that shortly after Medvedkine's death in 1989, when he died with a sense of hope for Russia, all hell broke loose. Marker notes that "the picture-book was closing." We see statues being pulled down, disgruntled pensioners (when food was scarce due to hoarding), an exhibition on the horrors of the Afghan War (which was prematurely shut down following the August 1991 coup d'état perpetrated against Gorbachev), Vladimir Zhirinovskiy (doors opening for demagogues), and the ravages of Chernobyl (post-1986).

<sup>5</sup> Viktor Dyomen notes that after the Civil War Medvedkine was made a general in the Red Army and placed in charge of propaganda, as a direct result of his absurdist "horse theater" – the skits he produced for troops during the Civil War, "between battles" and criticizing the preceding battle (skits populated and spoken by horses, speaking back to the troops, as it were). In the opening sequences of the second letter, Medvedkine states in one of several interviews included in the film that following the Civil War (plus the carnage of WWI) the bleak landscape of the new Soviet Union included broken industries, worn-out people everywhere, and – effectively – an entire generation of illiterate souls.

<sup>6</sup> With "Brechtian" signposts, also suggesting Godard's source for the same agit-prop affectation. Meyerhold's theater company produced the pre-packaged signposts that were used repetitively to semi-sarcastic effect in the ciné-train films, such as – to the effect – "Where is your conscience, Comrade?"

<sup>7</sup> In Letter Two Marker quickly unleashes a high-wattage montage of high-avant-garde 1920s Soviet art that is utterly dizzying. He notes that here the culture of the past met "all the impatience of the future – memory plus madness." "By mixing what others didn't dare to mix, they simply invented modern art." He then moves to cinema, by way of Sergei Eisenstein, commenting on the "beautifully symbolic" nature of Eisenstein's reversal of Tsarist propaganda in *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), where appearances are utilized *for* propaganda, versus Potemkin's propaganda *by* appearances. Yet already Marker slips in discomfiting gestures from the future, to show how in Odessa, Ukraine, the film has come to substitute for reality (and/or how art becomes reality), with the city having absorbed and commemorated the famous massacre on the steps depicted in the film, a massacre that never

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actually occurred (Eisenstein having invented it). Letter Two closes with reference to Russian filmmaker Roman Karmen (who famously re-staged the battle of Leningrad, in order to film it) and comments regarding his penchant for re-arranging history, Marker noting that Karmen did not believe in objectivity (and by the placement and tone of this statement, plus all of the other gestures within the film, we might also assume that the same applies to Marker). This is the time frame when the armored trains of the Civil War gave way to agit-prop trains (the precursors to Medvedkine's ciné-train experiments), and when Vertov and his brother began the Kino-Eye newsreels.

<sup>8</sup> Marker notes that what distinguished Medvedkine's documentation of the horrors of Soviet collectivization was that these appalling facts were viewed with a "socialist conscience." David Foster troubles the truth-telling aspect of Marker's narrative by conferring upon it a "critical-lyrical" quality that revolves around a "personally invested act of criticism." See Foster, "'Thought-Images' and Critical-Lyricisms: The *Denkbild* and Chris Marker's *Le tombeau d'Alexandre*."

<sup>9</sup> Many commentators on this film have noted that Marker often pairs certain figures to "dialectical" effect, as he pairs Medvedkine and Babel at one point (both visually and through the commentary). Medvedkine and Babel were both in the Red Cavalry (c.1919) during the Russian Civil War, whereas Babel (a Jew), operating as a war correspondent, went on to denounce the atrocities of the Cossacks (the cavalry) as it rampaged through the Ukraine and the Russian steppe, burning entire villages and serving summary judgment on supposed enemies of the Bolshevik terror. See Isaac Babel, *Red Cavalry* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1929) ... Medvedkine essentially romanticized this time and his role, never quite acknowledging what Babel exposed. Babel's diaries from 1920 form the basis for the somewhat fictionalized tales in *The Red Cavalry*. This use of Babel is not, however, without its own difficulties, as his works were equally distorted and marred by propagandistic and vapid ideological formulations that one could take as *necessary*, given his own need for survival, or *naïve*, given that the Bolshevik cause was – after all – very close to his heart, as it was for Medvedkine. Marker's voice-over at one point quotes Babel: "We looked on the world like a meadow in May crossed by women and horses." This romantic gesture is preceded, however, with the more grave statement that "epic is the silver lining of nightmare." See James Wood, "Effects and Causes" (review of *The Complete Works of Isaac Babel*, 2002), *The New Republic* (February 4, 2002), <http://www.tnr.com/article/effects-and-causes> (accessed 02/16/2012). This review, while mostly a critique of Babel's style, also connects obliquely to the primary literary issue that Marker wishes to exploit: "From Flaubert, Babel learned how to ration commentary; from Dostoevsky and Gorky, he learned that Russian history was a catalogue of violence and tragedy; from Gogol, he learned about grotesque portraiture; from Tolstoy, he learned that detail should be always dynamic, always attached to activity." Ibid. See I. Babel, *The Complete Works of Isaac Babel*, ed. Nathalie Babel, trans. Peter Constantine (New York: Norton, 2002). The book includes the original *Red Cavalryman* dispatches, plus early (intermediate) sketches that went into *The Red Cavalry* stories. Babel was arrested in early 1939, tortured, and "confessed" to Trotskyism, etc.; he was shot ten months later in January 1940. Meyerhold was executed less than a month later, after "confessing" to being a British and Japanese spy. His theater company had been shuttered by the authorities a few years earlier when all last remnants of avant-garde art were repressed by order of Stalin. Marker notes that, while a dissenting partisan of the romance of the Civil War (whereas as for Medvedkine the Civil War was the "foundation of his life" and remained so), Babel's essential problem was that his *literary style* could not help but pass judgment. In pairing Medvedkine and Babel, Marker is also underscoring a fundamental difference in artistic temperaments between the two. In Letter Two, Dyomen in many respects sums up the difference between Babel and those who survived the purges (at least *some of those* who survived) in describing Meyerhold and Medvedkine; that is, they were both ardent devotees of the propagation of new ideas, but also masters of satire – "feeding it to the people by the trough." While satire did not save Meyerhold, it may have played a role, however small, in Medvedkine's miraculous life; a life where – as Marker states at the outset (in a statement charged with a suitably infinite regress) – "miracles are one breath away from normality."

<sup>10</sup> See Chris Marker, "Sixties," pp. 2-6, in the booklet accompanying the DVD *Le fond de l'air est rouge/A Grin without a Cat* (Icarus Films, 2008), p. 4.

<sup>11</sup> This thread of Slavic religiosity is Ariadne's thread. It leads out of the labyrinth of endless semiosis (the plague of signs reeling out of control and something Marker does denounce in the last passages of the last letter, regarding television) – but it is a thread that is dangerously tattered as well. As it survives in Andrei Tarkovsky's films, and in other forms in the visual arts, it is also a perfect instantiation of the mystic "Franciscan" vision of the entire world hanging by a single strand of hair (in a vast and dark void). This Slavic religiosity is essentially a form of pansophism, and was exemplified in the literary undertakings of the Russian Silver Age, foremost in the writings of Vladimir Solovyev, Aleksandr Blok, and Andrei Bely. It shades into mysticism at times and is present as a unique poetical language and a form of "Slavic personalism" in the poetry of Anna Akhmatova and Osip Mandelstam. It returns in the films of Tarkovsky, arguably foremost in verbal form through the appropriations of his own father's poetry, but also in the *tableaux vivants* he assembled within his films and the celebrated long tracking shots that often accompany the dream sequences. Not symbolic so much as baroque and often florid, the literary effects are offset by the moral tenor – most decidedly in the recourse to a universalizing rationality within the poeticizing form. This same tendency toward pansophism and its often discordant variants is behind the arguments regarding Aleksey Khomyakov's influence on Pavel Florensky at the close of the Silver Age (1910-1920), the latter a late partisan of the Silver Age ethos nonetheless, this ethos essentially being the fusion of a "theological" vision with poetic vision. Solovyev's thundering moral philosophy is astonishing in this regard. Yet all of this is relatively a synthesis of now-classical historical forces, beginning with Aleksandr Pushkin, and effectively a series of incorporations or mutually imbricated syntheses of Eastern and Western artistic and religious innovations within traditional structures. At its worst, this tendency shades into mesmerism and occultism, producing the remarkable and mostly harmless aberrations typified by Grigori Rasputin, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, Nicholas Roerich, and George Gurdjieff. A unique figure bridging the two camps in Russian or Slavophile pansophism, Orthodox and otherwise, is Nicolas Berdyaev, who defended

Khomyakov against Florensky, and who adopting Marxism at the turn of century nonetheless retained that heightened regard for orthodoxy that is coupled with a disdain for the institutions that accompany it. Florensky's denunciation of Khomyakov is actually a mixed blessing insofar as it underscores the significance of his contribution (albeit in terms Florensky considered damning): "Khomyakov's thought slyly eludes ontologic definition, pouring forth with a mother of pearl play of colour. But this colour-play is one of superficial hues, dazzling, but not substantial, and therefore there are alterings and changes of the outline with but the slightest turn of the head, which provides not a stable grasp of thought and it leaves within the heart anxiety and question. Immanentism – suchlike is the flavour of the theory of Khomyakov." This passage is from Berdyaev's defense of Khomyakov. Florensky attacked Khomyakov in the pages of the *Bogoskovskii vestnik* (*Theological Messenger*) in July-August 1916. See N.A. Berdyaev, "Khomyakov and Fr. Florensky" (1917), [http://www.berdyaev.com/berdiaev/berd\\_lib/1917\\_257.html](http://www.berdyaev.com/berdiaev/berd_lib/1917_257.html) (accessed 02/16/2012). The issue of pan-Slavism and pansophism more or less fades away post-1920, in Russia, with the more universal aspects of its appeal being privileged in the turn to both the production of an anti-bourgeois, communist culture and – as antidote – the intense personal relationship to the same in the poetry and literature that will be increasingly suppressed by the Soviet authorities (major figures going underground and/or "dispatched" to the gulags of Siberia). The racial currents of pan-Slavism are kept alive, nonetheless, in the new nation states to the west born out of the carnage of WWI and the destruction of the Habsburg hegemony, most provocatively perhaps in Czechoslovakia where the battle between the new objectivity (the "New Man") and the old subjectivity is played out in the nationalist-cultural program of sociologist, professor, and politician Tomáš Masaryk (first President of the Czechoslovak Republic); that is, a mostly mythicized or mytho-poetic agenda carried out through careful elision of anything extra-territorial (including German influences) and visually and aesthetically presented to the public at Prague Castle with the help of the Slovene architect Josip Plečnik. The ČSR then underwent the same troubles as Russia, as Czech modernism arrived and began to confront the somewhat outmoded nationalistic and pseudo-traditional pretenses of Masaryk and Company. The Czechoslovak experiment collapsed in 1938 with the arrival (return) of the Germans. Post-WWII, the Czech and Slovak lands entered the Soviet Bloc. The same discord between Art and its Other (the world at large as ideology) is found in Czech art and belles lettres in the period from the founding of the Republic and its dissolution in 1938, with the poetist, critic, and artist Karel Teige being, arguably, the most complex figure in this regard. In cinema, the same struggle embodied in Medvedkine's work is found in the new-wave, avant-garde films of Věra Chytilová (banned by the Czechoslovak authorities in the 1960s) and the semi-absurdist works of filmmaker Jiří Menzel (drawing often on the equally semi-absurd, literary exploits of Bohumil Hrabal and others). The extreme, often catastrophic rapport between world and self (the very definition of "personalism") was embodied in the plays and essays of Václav Havel, a figure who would become, with the Velvet Revolution of November 17-December 29, 1989, the progenitor of a political vision (based on the concept of civil society) that is essentially *non*-political, at least in terms of the semantic connotations of the word at the time. Marker addresses the first outbreak of organized Czech resistance to Soviet hegemony, the so-called Prague Spring of 1968 (beginning with the election of Alexander Dubček as First Secretary of the Communist Party in January, and ending with the Soviet-Warsaw Pact invasion in August), in his monumental *Le fond de l'air est rouge* (1978).

<sup>12</sup> Rochal and Viktor Dyomen are the two more astute commentators deployed within Marker's commentary (a commentary within the commentary, as it were). As writers, they generally summarize the state of affairs within the Soviet system for intellectuals caught in the crosshairs of history. Both appear in the first letter to establish Medvedkine's artistic "bonafides," Dyomen saying that Medvedkine essentially "existed outside time," while his time nonetheless left its marks on him. Rochal first appears to explain how Medvedkine's soul was formed in pre-Soviet Russia, from a duality of religious and revolutionary presentiments that then converge in 1917. Marker's prologue notes that Medvedkine was five years old (he was actually two years old) when Lenin wrote "What is to be Done?" and that he was 17 "when he knew." The prologue also contains the ominous statement by Marker that "now I can write," following upon an admonition addressed to Marker by Medvedkine that he is a lazy bastard for *not* writing. This "now I can write" is due to Medvedkine's death ... Prior to that event "there were too many things to hush up." In Letter Four, Rochal explains that totalitarian art seeks to level everything, while Dyomen explains that bureaucracy comes to trump ideology and many works were banned in the Stalinist years simply due to "ambiguity," or that which truly troubles the bureaucrats in charge of the production of authorized culture. The fourth letter of *The Last Bolshevik* is particularly difficult vis-à-vis visual art, as it also develops the thematic of the repression to come in the late 1930s and the use of cinema during the show trials in service to "totalitarian justice." Marker notes that by this time "life has become a fiction film." He also drops into this section of the film a nod toward the future in the form of his visit to Moscow in 1990, with Costa-Gavras, for the premiere of the latter's film *L'aveu/Confession* (made with Marker in 1970). *Confession* documents the persecution of Artur London (a Czech communist official) during the 1952 Slánský show trial – part of a purge of the Czech Communist Party ordered by Stalin. At this point, Marker's point is to show how cinema has crossed over to the production or fabrication of outright lies, versus its more nuanced or critical-mytho-poetic role in the production of "utopia" (always to come).

<sup>13</sup> See Nora M. Alter, *Chris Marker* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), p. 51.

<sup>14</sup> Marker sees Medvedkine for the last time in 1988, on the way back from Tbilisi, Georgia, and Medvedkine is ebullient with the first flush of *perestroika* – yet this is before the impending collapse of the Soviet Union and the aftermath. Chris Marker, "The Last Bolshevik."

<sup>15</sup> Divided into two, approximately 60-minute segments, "Le royaume des ombres" ("The Kingdom of the Shadows"), Letters 1-3, and "Les ombres du royaume" ("The Shadows of the Kingdom"), Letters 4-6, the "Entr'acte" ("Intermission") for the 2009 DVD re-release of *The Last Bolshevik* is *Chat écoutant le musique/Cat Listening to Music* (from "Bestiary" in "Zapping Zone," 1990), an elegiac short film of Guillaume-en-Egypte, Marker's cat and alter ego, sleeping on the keyboard of an electronic piano, with music playing and a pulsing LED... Marker returns to music repeatedly in *The Last Bolshevik*, as "palliative," and the

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soundtrack is mostly composed of works by Alfred Schnittke (“In memoriam,” “Quintet,” “Trio,” “Violin Concerto”), plus tonal works by Michel Krasna (one of Marker’s pseudonyms). Perhaps Schopenhauer’s high regard for music is at play here; an artistic form that truly exceeds all expectations in the hands of a master, and which demolishes most forms of ideological appropriation and pretension through its sheer formalization. Marker notes, ironically, in one passage of *The Last Bolshevik* (by way of an avant-garde musical composition by Swiss composer Arthur Honegger) how lyricism (in music and otherwise) was perceived by the Soviet regime as the enemy of the “New Man,” while also noting that the authorities equally condemned fetishism of style or form – avant-gardism in/for itself. He then comments on the fact that this paradoxical, double-headed condemnation of both art and music by Soviet bureaucrats (meaning censors) preceded that time when everyone would be “guilty of something” (that is, the late 1930s). “Kingdom of the Shadows” is a reference to comments made by Gorky upon seeing a Lumière Brothers’ film at the All-Russia Fair in Nizhny Novgorod in 1896. Marker inverts the characterization of cinema by the progenitor of Socialist-Realism in the second half of *The Last Bolshevik* as a means of showing how cinema has become a means for the production of a shadowy and sinister, parallel world of pure propaganda.

<sup>16</sup> David Foster notes that the French title of the film – *Le tombeau d’Alexandre* – refers to a long-standing literary form in French letters, versus a tomb proper – though Marker invokes both the form *and* the object, at once. The “tombeau,” a literary-rhetorical address (and later musical genre) dating to the Renaissance, is “an intensely personal form similar to the elegy,” or “a text or a collection of writing to the memory of a deceased individual by one or several friends or admirers.” Foster is quoting Jacques Charpentreau, *Dictionnaire de la poésie* (Paris: Fayard, 2006). See Foster, “‘Thought-Images’ and Critical-Lyricisms: The *Denkbild* and Chris Marker’s *Le tombeau d’Alexandre*.” In this sense, the title of the film, in French and/or in English, retains an incommensurable quality that is in perfect keeping with Marker’s weaving together of criticism and elegy, plus his interweavings of literary and visual form.

<sup>17</sup> Film scholar Nikolai Izvolev is the primary interlocutor in the film, especially given his reconstructions of Medvedkine’s career. Other notable interlocutors include: Kira Paramonova (actor), Viktor Dyomen (writer/actor), Youli Raizman (director), Chongara Medvedkina (Medvedkine’s daughter), Lev Rochal (writer), Vladimir Dimitriev (actor), Antonina Pirojkova (widow of Babel), Marina Goldovskaya (filmmaker), and Yacov Tolchan (cameraman for both Medvedkine and Vertov).

<sup>18</sup> Francis Fukuyama’s now-discredited, infamous, neo-conservative acclamation/diatribe regarding the arrival of the “end of history,” with the fall of the Soviet Union, is instructive in this regard. See Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?,” *National Interest* (Summer 1989).

<sup>19</sup> During one of the commentaries covering the years of the ciné-train newsreels, Marker strikes a particularly telling “Markerian” note, by way of Medvedkine, when he remarks that within the bleak landscape of the collectivized factories, and by extension the endless meetings of the Communist Party committees attempting to formulate a strategy to extract maximum productivity from the workers, there are “no cultural workers present.” This is an exact formulation, by aside, to the premise for Marker’s work with SLON in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as it is also the precise reason for the establishment of People et Culture in the late 1940s in Paris, the group Marker associated himself with immediately after returning from “no-where” (his unknown activities during the war). In another fragment from Medvedkine’s film *Chudesnitsa/The Miracle Worker* (1936) a rather “literary” or “affected” portrait of a collectivized farm, a young girl/heroine (Nastasia) kneels before several milk cows writing on a sheet of paper her recommendation to the powers that be that to be kind to the cows might produce better quality milk. *Here* – finally – is a “cultural worker” hiding out in the frames of Medvedkine’s cunning portrait that verges on the theatrical, a quality that returns in his work (or never quite leaves, as such) as things grow more damning, foremost in the bizarre parable *Happiness* or the film *Novaya Moskva/New Moscow*. The latter film, made in 1938, enjoyed (according to Marker) exactly *one* screening before it was yanked by the censors for the usual reasons, or “ambiguity” (a synonym for plurisignation, one of the great attributes of high-formalist, Soviet avant-garde art). *New Moscow* documents the modernization of Moscow through architecture, with proposed plans taking on a decidedly de Chirico-esque quality, the “radiant future” apparently also a vast tableau of alienation. Marker indicates that, given the sets for this film-carnival, Medvedkine’s “excommunication” must be over, before noting that the 10-percent conformity at the end (the bow to Stalin) failed to save the film from recall anyway. That Medvedkine made these somewhat-late, satiric films so close to the Stalinist purges of the late 1930s, and survived to receive the Lenin Prize in 1971, is all the more remarkable. Izvolev explains in “Medvedkin and Dziga Vertov” that *Happiness* was not banned outright, but boycotted by the press (effectively the same fate suffered by the ciné-train newsreels). In the mid-1930s (according to Dyomen) both Medvedkine’s and Vertov’s film projects were, generally, either denied production or shelved upon release. The main culprit here seems to have been Boris Shumyatsky, head of the Soviet film industry, though he was arrested in 1938 and executed the same year. Medvedkine’s *The Miracle Worker*, however, was outright banned (initially), as was Eisenstein’s much darker *Bezhin Meadow* (1937), a film dealing with the betrayal of a father to the authorities by his son, a film which Medvedkine – as party member – then defended. Eisenstein, in turn, defended Medvedkine’s *Happiness*. Meanwhile, following on *Shestaya chast’ mira/A Sixth Part of the World* (1926), *Odinnadtsati/The Eleventh Year* (1928), and *Chelovek s kinoapparatom/Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), with a few films in-between, Vertov was back making opportunistic propaganda films – such as *Kolybel’naja/Lullaby* (1937), which was immediately shelved upon Stalin’s orders anyway – and fading slowly into obscurity. Nonetheless, both Vertov and Medvedkine returned “to the fold,” however briefly, in the early to mid-1940s filming the war, *at the front*. Medvedkine’s *Liberated Earth* (1945) documents the siege of Minsk. Midway through Letter Four, Marina Goldovskaya describes Vertov’s fate as particularly telling, in that he worshipped the god of Communism which was all the while “beating him from all sides.” Goldovskaya’s father worked with Shumyatsky – in a technical role within the film ministry. He was arrested, interrogated, and tortured at Lubyanka Prison, and later released, in association with the arrest of Shumyatsky – all apparently because a mercury vapor lamp blew up during a screening at a new theater in Moscow and the



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event was interpreted as an assassination attempt (“by the Japanese”) on the Politburo in attendance. See Marina Goldovskaya, *Woman with a Movie Camera*, trans. Antonina W. Bouis (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006). Dig deep enough into Marker’s films and they open up on to “Hell itself.” Within the many quotations of Medvedkine’s work in *The Last Bolshevik*, there is a moment when Marker shows a clip from a film about Russian *muzhiks* (peasants) who have descended to Hell and rather like it there, being accustomed to the “flames.” In many ways, in his late films especially, Marker is not unlike Medvedkine (and both are not unlike Antonin Artaud), sending secret hand signals through the flames – from within or beyond the collective madness of authorized culture.

<sup>20</sup> Medvedkine’s last films (from the late 1960s and early 1970s) involved bashing Maoism, and a somewhat bombastic treatment on the combined virtues of ecology and the USSR (*Anxious Chronicles*, 1972).