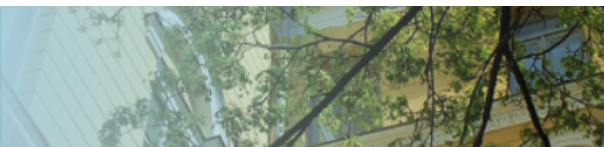


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In Search of True America:

Images From Ilf and Petrov's 1935 American Road Trip

1. Against all odds

This paper discusses a unique 1935 road trip to the United States by two Russian satirical authors Ilya Ilf and Evgeny Petrov, who travelled the entire length of the US on a rented Ford and captured their journey on camera. During their four-month expedition, Ilf and Petrov contributed articles to *Pravda*, and upon their return to the Soviet Union in 1936 the illustrated news magazine *Ogonek* published their photo-essay “American Photographs.” In 1937 this publication was followed by the two authors’ collaborative book entitled *One-Storyed America*, which, possibly for reasons of censorship, did not include photographs. In the introduction to the recent English-language publication of this travelogue that incorporates both the text and images, Erika Wolf writes that while today it may seem unlikely that Soviet writers could travel freely to the US in the 1930s, the time of this trip actually took place before the Stalinist terror and coincided with the United States diplomatic recognition of the Soviet Union in 1933.

Wolf addresses as well the Soviet Union’s “intense admiration” of American technology, which found its reflection in Ilf and Petrov’s travelogue.¹ In particular, the two authors spoke highly about American roads as “one of the most remarkable phenomena of American life.”² Their mode of travelling made a profound impact on their writing, as

well as the project's photographic component. As pointed out by Wolf, their travelogue, with its "shots of rural highways and road signs,"³ is reminiscent of Walker Evans' images of the Depression-era US made by Evans on behalf of the Farm Security Administration. Wolf goes on to compare the Russian project to Robert Frank's famous 1959 book of photographs entitled *The Americans*. She states that like Frank, Ilf and Petrov "created a similarly conflicted portrait of the United States" (xi).

On this account, in an essay also included in the English-language edition, Aleksandra Ilf provides the following quote from Ilf and Petrov, "But we don't understand that line of inquiry – to criticize or to praise. America isn't the premiere of a new play, and we aren't theatre critics. We just put our impressions and opinions of the country on paper."⁴ Their reluctance to either criticize or praise became the subject of the 1936 review by Aleksandr Rodchenko, who described Ilf's photography as lacking in distinct style. Using Rodchenko's review, as well as his other writings, this essay demonstrates that Ilf's photography, while it may fall out of the creative paradigm of the early Russian avant-garde, nevertheless delivers a revealing portrait of the 1930s US.

2. On the road with Ilf and Petrov

When they first arrived to the US, Ilf and Petrov took short trips to New York, Washington, and Hartford, the birthplace of Mark Twain, whose work was much admired in the Soviet Union. Everywhere they went, they were told, to their great confusion, that the true America was to be found elsewhere, although nobody "could say for certain" where that was. The two travellers then decided "to act in an organized fashion," namely

to cross the country “from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific and return by another road along the Gulf of Mexico, reasoning that indeed somewhere we’d be sure to find America.”⁵ With this in mind, they bought a Ford, “the cheapest way to travel in the United States,” and set out “from New York for America” (1).

Not surprisingly, the road becomes one of the central themes of their project. The two authors comment on the “majesty” of the American highway and its importance for the entire way of life in the US. For the benefit of the Russian reader, they explain the notion of the “scenic road,” which, as they put it, pursues the goal of showing “nature to travellers” so that they do not have to “scramble around on the cliffs in search of a convenient observation point,” but be able to obtain “the entire required quantity of emotions without ever leaving their automobile” (5). They write enthusiastically about gas stations, which they describe with a blend of poetry and humour characteristic of their entire book. As they point out, due to the “great American *service*” provided by the gas station attendant sporting a “striped cap and leather bow-tie,” the traveller is no hurry to leave the station: “He wants more *service*” (7).

Ilf and Petrov marvel as well at how all roads in the US are numbered, and that “it’s simply impossible to go the wrong way” (8). They take note of various road signs, and point out how those signs are never abstract and therefore “don’t require any guess work,” unlike the ones in the 1930s Russia, where a driver came across “a mysterious blue triangle in a red square, a sign whose meaning you can rack your brains over for

hours trying to figure out” (8). The two Russians also cite examples of dark humour found in American billboards, as in “Drive carefully. Cemetery after bend in road” (8).

Ilf, who acted as the project’s designated photographer, diligently captured various road attractions, including gas stations, road signs and the dark-humoured billboards. For one of Ilf’s photographs, depicting a typical gas station, the two authors proposed the following caption: “This right here is America!” (13). As Ilf and Petrov saw it, America was not Washington “with its gardens, columns, and a complete set of memorials,” nor the skyscrapers of New York, or the “steep streets and hanging bridges” of San Francisco, but rather “this intersection of two roads and a gas station against a background of wires and advertising billboards” (13).

3. Rodchenko against “bookkeeping”

Upon the first publication of their American photo-essay in Russia, Ilf’s pictures were reviewed by the prominent avant-garde photographer Aleksandr Rodchenko, who saw them as bland and lacking “the ironic, sharp eye that Ilf and Petrov possess in literature.”⁶ Rodchenko suggests that the reason for this deficiency was that “Ilf photographed life in America as material for recollection, as documentary observations for the writer’s notebook” (149). Rodchenko himself strongly opposed this type of documentary photography and described it as “bookkeeping,” which in his opinion was not photography at all (151).

When scrutinizing his pictures, Rodchenko writes that Ilf fails to consider “graphic methods” and instead represents the landscape “honestly: half sky, half ground” (149). In Rodchenko’s view, the photograph must “complicate things” and employ more sophisticated methods, such as foreshortening. He writes that the professional photographer “would wait for the moment when the highway would be packed with the most cars, or would use a filter in order to play up the clouds or the shadows of columns, etc” (151). Rodchenko points out that Ilf’s pictures contain “much naïve charm”, that they reveal his good taste, his desire to record things simply, without “sophistries,” but that his work is a “photo-primitive” and is reminiscent of the painter Henri Rousseau, whose work was admired by Picasso (151).

As other avant-garde artists of his generation, Rodchenko urged to “wage war against art, as against opium.”⁷ As he argues, “all paintings, with negligible exceptions, are painted ‘from the navel’ or at eye level.”⁸ When discussing the history of art, he distinguishes several paths, including the “individual-psychological approach,” as represented by Leonardo da Vinci and Rubens, “mannerism, painting for the sake of painting,” as in the work of van Gogh, Cézanne, Matisse, Picasso and Braque, and abstraction, “in which the interest in the object remains almost scientific” (208). He states that while exploring such aspects as composition, texture and space, painters neglect to account for point of view, perspective and foreshortening, which remain “completely unused” (208). In Rodchenko’s opinion, only the “new, rapid” medium of photography offers the possibility of “showing the world from all points, of educating the ability to see from all sides” (209).⁹

On this score Rodchenko crossed swords with the magazine *Sovetskoe foto* (Soviet Photography), in which, as he writes, “the psychology of the ‘painting navel’ is unleashed on the contemporary photographer with the authority of centuries behind it” (208). He says that the modern world, with its skyscrapers, oversized advertisements, automobiles and airplanes, “has shifted the customary psychology of the visual perception,” but that nevertheless a sixty-eight story building in America is still photographed “at a navel level” (209). To capture it, the traditionalists “climb up onto a nearby building and shoot the sixty-eight-story giant from the 34th floor.” When no appropriate structure can be found nearby, they use retouching so as to achieve “the same frontal, designed look” (209).

Rodchenko also finds faults when analyzing a picture of a skyscraper by Ilf. He writes that when photographing a skyscraper from a car window, one inevitably becomes a “formalist” and shoots it “from below to above,” and that this was precisely Ilf’s strategy.¹⁰ He says that Ilf’s picture “is ultra-formalist, desperately distorted, and it sinks hopelessly, driven into the frame” (152). Ironically, Rodchenko himself was frequently criticized for his “formalist” leanings, most famously for his series of pictures of young pioneers, which, as his detractors charged, depicted monsters and violently contradicted the symmetry of the human body. Because his work was inconsistent with the Socialist Realist doctrine that advocated the realistic mode of representation, Rodchenko eventually was expelled from various professional associations of photographers, including the October group which he helped to establish. He had trouble publishing his photography and securing official commissions. Towards the end of his life, he went

back to painting, a medium with which he began his professional career and which he subsequently denounced as retrograde.

4. To capture life “unawares”

In his review of Ilf’s American photography, Rodchenko singles out a picture of a cowboy walking by an automobile, which he describes as follows, “It’s as if they [Ilf and Petrov] missed the opportunity to shoot it and then shot from behind, hence the unexpected turn of the figure, the unexpected background. However, there is persuasiveness in all of this and the entire photo agitates precisely with this unexpectedness” (151). As is evident from this passage, the reason why this shot is worthwhile is its “unexpectedness,” a quality strongly advocated by Rodchenko, as well as other avant-garde artists of the early Soviet era working in both photography and film.

As stated repeatedly in his writings, Rodchenko was against any staging in photography, and on this account he defended the genre of photo reportage, whose practitioners must capture “whatever happens, in whatever lighting and from whatever point of view.”¹¹ He says that while it is “considered something inferior” to artistic photography, photo reportage “in fact brought about a revolution in photography” (210). Rodchenko laments instances of staging that “corrupt” the photo reportage, as when he witnessed reporters setting up “staged dancers and picturesque groups” during a workers’ picnic (210). He says that everyone was “posing,” and that “a minute before the photographer arrived, these people were doing something of their very own and were in their own places”

(210). Discouraged by what he saw, Rodchenko calls upon reporters to stay true to their genre and take pictures “unexpectedly, unawares.”

In his 1928 essay “Against the Synthetic Portrait, For the Snapshot,” Rodchenko once again discusses the collision of “art and photography, a battle between eternity and the moment.”¹² By way of comparison he refers to science and technology, stating that scientists “do not reveal common truths – ‘the earth revolves’ – but are working on the problem of this revolution” (252). Moreover, this research involves “not just one scientist, but thousands of scientists and tens of thousands of collaborators,” who produce “thousands of airplanes, motorcars, and thousands of methods of rejuvenation” (252). Similarly, writes Rodchenko, “with the invention of photographs, there can be no question of a single, immutable portrait” (253). He asks provocatively, “show me where and when and of which artistically synthetic work one could say: this is real V. I. Lenin.” In his opinion, “a man is not just one sum total; he is many, and sometimes they are quite opposite,” and, therefore, a file of snapshots “can debunk any artistic synthesis produced by one man” (253).

Dziga Vertov, the director of the pioneering film *The Man With a Movie Camera* (1929), also advocated the task of catching life “unawares.” Speaking on behalf of the Cine-Eye group at a 1924 meeting, Vertov denounced “the love- or detective-based inventions of one or another person’s ‘inspiration.’”¹³ In place of the plot-driven cinema, Vertov urged to “see and hear life, to notice its curves and sudden changes, to catch the crunch of old bones under the press of the Revolution” (115). He pointed out that this task “is not

within the power of a few people,” but that it “requires the measure of the entire Soviet state” and must be performed by the “whole expanding apparatus of worker and village correspondents” (115). Only this way a film will be “real and not imaginary” (116).

While advocating the importance of capturing life “unawares,” Vertov stressed the need for a “skilful organization of the filmed factual material” as a way to “create a ‘work of cinema’ of *great agitational power*” (116). The contradiction implied in this mandate was clarified by Vertov’s associate Vladimir Blyum, who points out that the title of Vertov’s film *Life Caught Unawares* contains “grounds for a polemic.”¹⁴ Blyum explains that when presented with life “caught unawares,” the viewer “will not see anything that makes sense,” and that, therefore, the task proposed by the Cine-Eye group was to “consciously” select a moment and carve an image “worthy of the chisel of a great sculptor” (119). He goes on to say that the “*organized eye* does not require any ‘device’ for agitation: it merely scrutinises with its intellect the thick of life, the life of the *mass*” (119).¹⁵

5. True America

It was this criteria, namely the importance of catching life “unawares” and, at the same time, employing the “organized” eye in selecting and carving the image, that Rodchenko applied when analyzing Ilf’s American photography. In concluding his review, he writes that Ilf’s pictures can be seen as a “good start,” but that Ilf must work further on developing a “singular style,” and that this style must be “new and sharp.”¹⁶ He reiterates his hope that “in the hands of the non-photographer,” the Leica too could “widen the

possibilities of photography” (152). As a way of example, Rodchenko refers to the author Ilya Erenburg, who “saw Paris differently and in his own way,” and asks, “Why shouldn’t Ilf show his own different America?” (152).

Rodchenko’s criticism notwithstanding, Ilf’s photographs provide a fitting counterpart to the text of the travelogue. In the chapter on “The Small Town,” Ilf and Petrov write that “skyscrapers, as well as surface and underground trains, are attributes of New York and Chicago,” and that the “general mass of American cities” contain no skyscrapers and are “indistinguishable.”¹⁷ They have “the same pavement, the same automobiles, and the same billboards,” and even the same smell, that of exhaust (16). Some small towns “take heroic measures to stand out from their monotonous brethren,” as testified by Redwood City in California, where, so as to reassure visitors that they are not lost, the Main Street featured an “anxious sign” that read “Redwood City,” and under it a caption, “Climate best by government test” (23).

The “monotony” of small-town America finds its reflection in Ilf’s photography, which, to quote Rodchenko, “honestly” documents the journey. The only time when Ilf and Petrov lament the limitations of the photographic medium is when they arrive to the “majestic and beautiful” American desert. They write that although the word “desert” symbolizes “monotony,” the American desert is “unusually diverse,” and that no photograph could ever “convey the grandeur of this sight that has no equal on Earth” (57).¹⁸ Other than this, his Leica, as well as his less adventurous techniques, appear to serve Ilf well. Rodchenko, who found plenty of things to photograph in and around his

apartment building in Moscow, urged to capture the familiar or the well-known in a new light, to reveal the extraordinary in the ordinary. For his part, Ilf found himself confronted with an opposite task, that of capturing the ordinary behind the extraordinary. For a Soviet person, write Ilf and Petrov, America “has well-developed grandiose associations,” but in reality this country tends to frustrate those inflated expectations (15). The greatest surprise of their journey was the discovery of the “indistinguishable” side of America.

In this regard, Ilf, whose pictures duly record this startling discovery, succeeds in presenting “his own different America,” the America defined by a gas station “at the intersection of two roads.” Rodchenko has a point when he compares Ilf to the primitivist Rousseau, but Ilf’s work might have more in common with Edward Hopper, the author of many iconic landscapes of rural America, among them pictures of gas stations, *Gas* (1940) and *Four Lane Road* (1956), as well as the piercing *Solitude* (1944) depicting a lone country house by yet another paved road, whose destination is unclear and “uninviting.”¹⁹ Like Hopper, whose early art also dates from the 1920s and 1930s, Ilf simply “depicts life, relates history,” rather than telling a story, but his work, as is characteristic of Hopper as well, reveals “the latent drama of mundane scenes” (68).

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¹ Erika Wolf, “Introduction” in *Ilf and Petrov’s American Road Trip* (New York: Cabinet Books, Princeton Architectural Press, 2007), xii.

² Ilya Ilf and Evgeny Petrov, *Ilf and Petrov’s American Road Trip*, 5.

³ Wolf, “Introduction,” xi.

⁴ Aleksandra Ilf, “Ilf and Petrov’s Discovery of America,” in *Ilf and Petrov’s American Road Trip*, 154.

⁵ Ilf and Petrov, *Ilf and Petrov’s American Road Trip*, 1.

⁶ Aleksandr Rodchenko, “Ilya Ilf’s American Photographs,” in *Ilf and Petrov’s American Road Trip*, 149.

⁷ Aleksandr Rodchenko, “Against the Synthetic Portrait, For the Snapshot,” in *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, ed. John E. Bolt (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1991), 253.

⁸ Aleksandr Rodchenko, “The Path of Contemporary Photography,” in *Aleksandr Rodchenko: Experiments for the Future: Diaries, Essays, Letters, and Other Writings*, ed. Alexander N. Lavrentiev (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2005), 207.

⁹ The relationship between art and photography has since been addressed by many scholars, among them Susan Sontag, who scrutinises important differences between the two realms. However, unlike Rodchenko, Sontag describes photography as a “way of imprisoning reality,” of making it “stand still” (356). She writes that “one can’t possess reality, one can possess (and be possessed by) images,” and that to “possess the world in the form of images is, precisely, to reexperience the unreality and remoteness of the real” (356). See Susan Sontag, “The Image-World,” in *A Susan Sontag Reader* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 350.

¹⁰ Rodchenko, “Ilya Ilf’s American Photographs,” 151-152.

¹¹ Rodchenko, “The Path of Contemporary Photography,” 210.

¹² Rodchenko, “Against the Synthetic Portrait,” 252.

¹³ Dziga Vertov, “Fiction Film Drama and the Cine-Eye,” in *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents 1896-1939*, ed. Richard Taylor (London: Routledge, 1988), 116.

¹⁴ Vladimir Blyum, “Against the ‘Theatre of Fools’ – For Cinema,” in *The Film Factory*, 119.

¹⁵ Steve Edwards has described the early avant-garde as practised in Germany and Russia as an “art of juxtaposition which sought to make passive consumption difficult.” He contrasts this approach with endless and parasitical recycling characteristic of postmodernism that results in history turning into a “mere repository of advertisements, magazine photographs and general media ideologies.” See Steve Edwards, “Snapshots of History: Passages on the Postmodern Argument,” in *The Photography Reader*, ed. Liz Wells (London: Routledge, 2003), 188, 191.

¹⁶ Rodchenko, “Ilya Ilf’s American Photographs,” 154.

¹⁷ Ilf and Petrov, *Ilf and Petrov’s American Road Trip*, 16.

¹⁸ Many years later, Baudrillard has described American desert as “suspended eternity,” see chapter “Desert For Ever,” in Jean Baudrillard, *America*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 1988), 121-128.

¹⁹ Wieland Schnied, *Edward Hopper: Portraits of America* (Munich: Prestel, 2005), 84.