

# TeleVISIONS

Formerly Community Video Report



## VIDEOSHIK И МОСКОУ

By Dimitri Devyatkin

Self-portrait of the author

On a chilly May Day, in the outskirts of Moscow, the videoshnik starts rolling tape, watching the marchers of the great parade begin their trek to the Kremlin.

Babushkas sell pastries and sausage sandwiches. Children ride bicycles and hold their daddys' hands. Loyal Party followers drag giant portraits-on-wheels of the unblemished pink faces of their leaders. Peasants dance along behind an accordianist, and an amateur jazz band comes by playing, "And the Saints Come Marchin' In."

The tempo quickens as the march approaches tremendous Red Square. The videoshnik in among the marchers flows past the legions of police and soldiers. Security men, shoulder-to-shoulder, line the parade route. Then, into the videoshnik's viewfinder come the waving figures of Leonid Brezhnev and Alexei Kosygin, atop the tomb of Lenin. The videoshnik zooms in and holds it...one minute...even longer. Finally, a K.G.B. man comes over and says, "Enough. Show me your documents."

But he let me go.

People are very surprised I was able to make videotapes so easily in the Soviet Union. I had virtually no problems. Perhaps it was that my hosts trusted me, allowing me such great freedom of movement. Or maybe it was because so few people know what video is that no one thought to stop me.

It was a strange feeling to be the only videoshnik in the U.S.S.R.

Half inch portable video as we know it has barely appeared in the Soviet Union. The only half inch equipment I saw was at the Institute of Journalism. The television journalism department offers students the use of a few Japanese made, European standard machines. In a suite of a downtown hotel, a Japanese businessman from AKAI sells video equipment. The Institute of Cinematography has a large television

production department, but all of the machines are two inch. They expect to acquire portable machines soon. Porta-paks and U-matic cassette recorders are used in the major studios for screen tests. And, some people have told me that they were video taped by K.G.B. agents, quite openly using Sony portapak for surveillance.

Shortly before my departure, I heard much about and saw photographs of the new Soviet made color portable, video recorder. From the outside, it seems to be modeled after the Panasonic portapak, but in salmon colored plastic. It has an internal battery, playback capability, with a color camera, and control unit. People who have used the machine told me that the color reproduction was good, that the machine seemed to be ruggedly made, and performed well, even though it was an early model. Access to these machines is limited as they are owned only by organizations. Individuals

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*Dimitri Devyatkin, an American videoartist of Russian descent, traveled to the Soviet Union in 1973-4 to spend a year studying directing and documentary films at the State Institute of Cinematography—V.G.I.K.—as well as Russian at Moscow State University.*

*But the real reason for his trip was to make videotapes, and he succeeded in returning with over 25 hours of valuable material, which has been edited into several programs. A one-man show of his work ran in February and March at the Everson Museum in Syracuse.*

*Before going to the USSR, Devyatkin worked extensively in half-inch video. He was one of the original co-directors of "The Kitchen" experimental video theatre in New York City, and has shown tapes in museums, universities, community video centers and on broadcast and cable television. He is a contributing editor to TeleVISIONS.*

can use them only through official channels. None of the machines are for sale to consumers. The same is true of 35mm film equipment. Professional filmmakers look with disdain, scorning the 8mm and 16mm equipment as fit only for amateurs. But a friend of mine, a farout artist/film animator, has been given a new color portapak to use for a year. Video has a long way to go in the U.S.S.R., but it will spread...like a fire in dry grass...once it gets started.

I was highly impressed by the technical quality of the Soviet television programs I saw. Their standard is 625 horizontal lines, compared with our 525, so the resolution is slightly superior. The color is a system called C-Camp, shared only with the other Socialist countries and France. It is different and incompatible with the American and Japanese N.T.S.C. system, and with the system used in Western Europe excluding France, PAL. More than half of all new television sets made now in the U.S.S.R. are color, and they cost approximately \$200-\$400.

Television program material seemed to be of generally high quality. There are frequent news reports, with a big evening news report showing flourishing luxury and industry in the Socialist world, alternating with strikes and starvation in the degenerate West. Films are shown often: documentaries, dramatic films, foreign and Soviet, old and new. There is a full diet of sports, concerts, solo performers, and public affairs. One misses the frequent commercial interludes during which we Americans have learned to perform our necessary bodily functions. I saw old reruns of "Lassie" dubbed in Russian.

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# VIDEOSHIK IN MOSCOW



Moscow schoolgirl



Widow at Orthodox cathedral



'Anti-worlds'

Photos: Dimitri Devyatkin

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Still, I felt the same attitude of Big Media, booming down to millions of passive viewers, condescending, and slick. Commentators and emcees act just as predictably as their NBC counterparts. However, recently there has been a liberalization in some areas. A number of startling muckraking programs have been broadcast. In one such program, school children are asked to evaluate their parents. Then the parents are asked to evaluate themselves. They didn't know their children had already marked them. Criticism is openly voiced against drunkenness, laziness, and disregard for children.

Of course, as it is a state owned media, there is no open criticism of the government. There is no concept of public access to the media. The Soviets have a completely different notion of freedom of the press. They insist that only the proletariat has the right to spread their views among the society. Alternative views are necessarily opposing, and therefore threatening. Lenin wrote that all social science must be partisan, favoring one of the two main opposing classes, the monopolists, or the proletariat. Class affiliation and origins always manifest themselves, in the views of any researcher.

## Education of film workers

I got some rare glimpses into the workings of the Soviet film industry. First, I saw how cinema workers are educated. V.G.I.K., the All-Union State Institute of Cinematography, has 800 full time students, and 800 by correspondence. The students remain in groups of 15-20 under a single master, for the entire course of study, 4 or 5 years. My master was the legendary director of documentary films, Roman Karmen, People's Artist of U.S.S.R. and winner of the Lenin prize. He is over 65, but he continues to direct films, go on world tours lecturing and showing films, as well as give lectures at V.G.I.K. twice weekly. Since it is the central school for cinema workers in the country, competition for every place is very intense. After finishing V.G.I.K. one is assured for a job in the film industry for the rest of one's life. All professions are taught: director, of dramatic, documentary, popular science, and television productions; camera operator, with the same four types; actors, actresses, artists, set designers, producers, film critic, and other specialties.

The film students are a privileged group, upon whom are lavished great quantities of resources. Besides being paid a stipend to be a student, of \$135 per month, film students are provided with vast material resources: many feet of film, cameras, accessories, lights, sets, actors, camera operators, post-production facilities, and more. Many of the student films I saw were innovative, technically and conceptually. The most impressive films were often of a very personal nature, revealing intimate details of tingling life situations. Every student gets to make at least one major film every year, but the greatest effort is made in the final year. Most of the dramatic films were non-political in subject matter, though some were strongly political. Each film must receive the approval of the master on the basis of a script. But once the actual shooting has begun, considerable freedom could be exercised. All students study political economy, and the history of the Communist Party. Their performance in these classes has a strong influence on their over-all grade standing.

Nevertheless, the Institute is said to be one of the most liberal in Moscow. Many of the students wear Western made clothing and long hair. To see foreign films in the U.S.S.R. is a very great privilege, and the film students are especially privileged in this way. I saw Fellini's "Amarcord" at a student screening.

At the Union of Cinematographers, I got to see many outstanding films from other Republics of the U.S.S.R. Many Americans are unaware that the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics consists of 15 separate Republics, of which Russia is the largest. Each Republic has its own national language, distinct native dress and culture, and different life styles. It is as wrong to call the U.S.S.R. "Russia" as it is to refer to the United States as "America." There are so many other nations



At the Mayday Parade

than the U.S. in America, and other peoples of the U.S.S.R. than just Russians.

Especially wondrous films were from Georgia, and from Kirghizia, in Central Asia. The peoples of those regions have only lately acquired modern technology. Kirghizia didn't have a written language until after the coming of Soviet Power. The films show a deeply felt, and delicately expressed knowledge of the beauty of the earth, and the strange people inhabiting those regions. Greater freedom of experimentation is found in the smaller Republics than in the mammoth central studios of Moscow and Leningrad. The bureaucracy is not as able to dictate policy from such a great distance. The same was true in the 1920's, when Dziga Vertov made his outrageously experimental cinematic statements in the Ukraine, far away from the Moscow bureaucrats.

Some contemporary films which have been shown in the West that I would recommend you see if possible are: *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*, *There Lived a Singing Thrush*, *Andrei Rublov*.

These films have been shown only a very few times in the U.S. They will surely impress you that there is an active modern cinema in the Soviet Union. Perhaps that is precisely what American film distributors are anxious to keep secret by not distributing them here.

## Film culture in Soviet Union

Film culture is highly developed in the U.S.S.R. The Soviet people are some of the world's most avid moviegoers. They average over 12 times a year per citizen. Tickets are modestly priced at 50 kopeks (about \$.68). There are many local cinema halls, and downtown there are quite a few "super gigantic", 70 mm screens. There are many film publications. All aspects of the industry are owned and operated by the government. Although cinema is a tremendous industry, the impulse seems to be less profit motivated. Choice of a film, or how long it will run in a particular theatre are questions which monetary questions effect less than in the capitalist world. Many films, after the tremendous expense of shooting, editing, post-production, and even printing, will sit on a shelf, not to be shown because of some moral or ideological objection. Western films are very popular, especially from the U.S., England, France, and Italy, usually dubbed into Russian. There is one theatre run by the State Film Archives, called the Kino Theatre Illusion, where films are shown in their original language, simultaneously translated over the sound system. At the Illusion, there are two films shown a day, with screenings starting in the morning, going through the night. Courses are offered in film history and theory.

I played small bit parts in three general audience films. This enabled me to see certain aspects of the film industry from the inside. I was surprised that extras were allowed to sit

idle for hours, while the director went over some details with the stars. Such easily avoidable expenses would be strictly prevented in a capitalist production. In the Soviet system, the director, known as the "regisseur", is the real boss. The producer, called the "director", is just a money manager and exercises much less authority than the "regisseur". Some of the great directors of the Heroic Era of Soviet cinema, the 1920's and 30's, are still around. I met quite a few: Yutkevitch, Trauberg, Mikhail Kaufman, brother of Dziga Vertov, and Madame Alexandra Haxhlova, a great actress of the Soviet silent era.

Besides those three minor roles, I was involved much more deeply with a group of filmmakers working at the Experimental Creative Division of Mosfilm, making a large-budget, mass distribution film. The film—about the expansion of the hidden resources of the brain—will be a feature length, color 35 mm semi-documentary, also using actors. The major focus of the film is on the new science of *Suggestology*, a science of human personality, which heals and teaches. The suggestive methods have been most successfully applied in teaching foreign languages. In the normal waking state, without drugs or hypnosis, students learn more than 1000 words in a single four hour session and learn to speak fluently in one or two months of classes. I was able to make videotapes of sessions at the Moscow State Pedagogical Institute named after Maurice Thorez, one of the most prestigious foreign language institutes in the U.S.S.R. There are groups using these methods to teach French to adults, in 2½ months. Just this month, May 1975, there has been a flurry of interest in Suggestology. There have been major symposiums in Los Angeles, and in Washington, D.C. The principal speaker at both events was the founder of Suggestology, and the Director of the Research Institute of Suggestology, Dr. Georgi Lozanov, of Sofia, Bulgaria. I have been invited to return to the Soviet Union, to continue working with the group of filmmakers on this film, by making video tapes. I have been encouraged to seek support for a series of programs prepared for U.S. television, also about Suggestology. I am now trying to engage such support, to enable me to produce such a series of programs.

## Other videotapes in USSR

I was able to make other related video tapes, including some made in various psychiatric clinics, one famous for curing stutterers. I taped interviews between the psychiatrist and patients, some of whom were accompanied by parents. Another clinic has a special screen, upon which Sergei Zorin, a young light artist, makes psychedelic patterns of colored lights, ooze and swirl to music. The patients sit in special airplane chairs, strapped in, with music coming over earphones. They sit for 30-45 minutes a day, for two to four weeks, as a cure for mild depression. Light art is fairly popular throughout the Soviet Union, roots traceable to the great Aleksander Scriabin's light organ in the early 1900's.

I visited another psychiatric hospital known for its innovative techniques. Psycho-dramas, exercise groups and drawings classes were part of therapy and analysis. Also, I was able to dub a copy of a film made the hospital's patients and staff. It was a short spoof on psychiatric care through the ages: a cave man scene, an Arabian nights sequence, and a modern-day bit. You cannot distinguish the doctors from the patients.

*Writers Note: Besides these tapes already mentioned, I also recorded four complete plays by the Taganka Theatre, the most popular, and most experimental theatre in Moscow; the May Day parade in Moscow; an elementary school; an interview with a famous dissident sculptor, Ernst Nezhvestni; interview with a well-known psychiatrist, Dr. Ilya Velvovskiy; a visit to Leningrad; an opera performed by La Scala Opera from Milan, Italy, in their triumphant Moscow appearance; as well as tapes made with friends, of musical performances, street scenes, and so on. I have prepared various edited versions of these tapes, copies of which are available. Write or call for further information: Dimitri Devyatkin; 195 Nagle Avenue; New York, N.Y. 10034; Tel. [212] 569-7167.*