

*Sovetskaia vlast' i media*, Hans Günther and Sabine Hänsgen (eds.) (2006)

St. Petersburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 620 pp, Name Index, Price varies, ISBN 978-5-7331-0335-8.

Review by Alexander Prokhorov – College of William and Mary



Hans Günther and Sabine Hänsgen offer students of Soviet culture a comprehensive study of its media from the first part of the twentieth century. The collection of 38 articles is a product of a conference on 'The Political as the Communication Space in History' held at the University of Bielefeld, Germany in 2003. The primary focus of the conference was the changing nature of political power during the introduction of new media, such as photography, cinema and radio in the Soviet Union of the 1920s and 1930s. The collection includes recent scholarship by leading American, British, French, German and Russian researchers and consists of two parts: the first

deals with general theoretical issues and covers audio media, photography, print media and theatre; part two is dedicated to various aspects of cinema in Soviet culture in the 1920s and the Stalinist era.

The key point of departure for the contributors is the assumption that media do not provide a neutral channel to transmit information, but shape the meaning transmitted via this channel. In the avant-garde culture of the 1920s, media politicized the masses, but during the Stalinist era it represented the tension between archaic tropes and modern channels of communication. The contributors pay special attention to political power as the inherent structuring agent of the media. Finally, the collection addresses Russian cultural specifics in appropriating modern media: belated universal literacy, the late rise of print media, the persisting role of the oral tradition and the comparative prominence of the old media (literature, painting, music, theatre and folklore) at the expense of the modern media (radio, photography and cinema).

Part one opens with the section 'General Aspects of Media Communication', addressing such issues as the role of radio in the formation of socialist realist culture (Iurii Murashov), the role of media self-referentiality under Stalin (Sven Spieker) and Walter Benjamin's perception of Soviet Russia in his Moscow diary (Mikhail Ryklin). The section dedicated to audio media includes essays by Vladimir Koliada and Elena Petrushanskaia, emphasizing the importance of gramophone record production and the distribution infrastructure inherited from tsarist Russia for the dissemination of the new Soviet content. Tat'iana Gorjaeva and Anna Novikova contributed

pieces on the role of radio, and Aleksandr Sherel' analyzes the radio and theatrical experiments of Erwin Piscator and Sergei Eisenstein. Julia Kursell's discussion of Bernstein's studies of the biomechanics of piano-playing for the optimal organization of socialist production concludes the section.

The 'Visual Media' section focuses primarily on photography. Rosalinde Sartorti uses Vladimir Paperny's structuralist model of Soviet culture to analyze the evolution of Soviet photography in the 1920s and 1930s, and claims that photography only played a marginal role in Stalinist culture. Galina Orlova follows the same methodological model to analyze the meanings of photographic realism in the same period. Evgenii Dobrenko argues that early Soviet photography foregrounds modern production practices, as opposed to western photography that focuses on facilitating consumption. Ekaterina Degot' provides the most unorthodox argument in this section, claiming that Socialist realism is an integral part of the modernist tradition and contending that Socialist realist art is more radical than avant-garde art. Boris Groys concludes the section explaining the absence of influence of avant-garde photography on Soviet conceptualist art.

The 'Print Media' section includes three articles about the newspapers, illustrated magazines and literature of the Stalin era. Jeffrey Brooks contends that the Soviet press *Pravda*, above all, was primarily a means of communication for the Soviet elite, not for the masses. Maiia Turovskaia compares *Ogonek* and *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* to argue that they offered a similar notion of modernity while differing in their modes of representation. Dirk Uffermann claims that Nikolai Ostrovskii's novel *How the Steel was Tempered* appropriates the Christian story of self-sacrifice and exploits it for the Soviet agenda of labour and military mobilization.

The section 'Body in Theatre and Cinema' opens with Igor' Chubarov's inquiry into Nikolai Evreinov's recreations of the storming of the Winter Palace and his concept of the 'theatricalization of life'. Oleg Aronson revises the traditional opposition between Vsevolod Meyerhold's biomechanics and Konstantin Stanislavsky's psychological acting. Oksana Bulgakowa presents an excerpt from her book *Factory of Gestures*, dealing with the representations of the body in Soviet cinema.

Part two examines the motion picture as Soviet culture's most important medium, first exploring the significance of sound and orality in Soviet cinema. Valerie Pozner analyzes the role of red commentators, who explained the filmic image to early Soviet audiences. Sabine Hänsgen examines the exchange between various approaches (avant-garde, commercial and totalitarian cinema) to optical sound recording technologies in early Soviet sound cinema. Finally, the groundbreaking essays by Nikolai Izvolov, Evgenii Margolit and Aleksandr Deriabin uncover new pages in the history of early Soviet talkies.

The sections on screenplay writing and film genres in Soviet cinema discuss the evolution of these artistic forms in the 1920s and the Stalinist period. Il'ia Kukui and Barbara Wurm look at scriptwriting experiments by Lev Lunts and Iurii Tynianov, while Anke Hennig investigates the rise of the Stalinist screenplay as the verbal art form designed to control the motion picture's potential ideological instability. Emma Widdis analyzes

the role of the documentary in Soviet attempts to create a coherent visual narrative of an egalitarian Soviet Union. Nadezhda Grigor'eva examines representations of socialist labour in Soviet cinema. Schamma Schahadat claims that Russian symbolist philosophers favour the divine agency as the essential third participant in any relationship between two characters and analyzes this narrative structure as it manifests itself in Soviet cinema. Finally Anna Bohn argues for the evolution of the Soviet biopic from the films about empire builders in the 1930s to the films about outstanding Russian scholars and artists in the 1940s.

The section on Sergei Eisenstein opens with an essay on the role of revolutionary violence in *Strike* (Valerii Podoroga). Wolfgang Beilenhoff explores how Eisenstein creates the collective body of the masses via montage in *Battleship Potemkin* and how he tries to infect the viewer with the spirit of revolutionary masses. Finally, Hans Günther compares Eisenstein's and Aleksandr Dovzhenko's treatment of the archetype of the mother, central for Stalinist mythology.

The section 'Russia and America' re-evaluates the established approaches to the ties between the two cultures. Sergei Kapterev claims that the Americanism of avant-garde film-makers should be re-evaluated and put in the context of a dialogue between European and Russian cinema. Gudrun Heidemann analyzes the reception of Chaplin by Soviet avant-garde cinema. Finally, in her brilliant essay, Natascha Drubek-Meyer contends that Soviet musical comedy cannot be discussed as a direct transplantation of American genre models because Soviet film-makers exploited folk, European and American musical traditions.

The volume's major strength is the variety of approaches to Soviet media and the scope of types of media covered. While most of the essays are well-researched, in the opinion of this reader, Murashov's essay stands out in its theoretical significance for the field and establishing thought-provoking connections between media and power in Soviet culture. The volume is a major contribution to the fields of Russian studies, as well as media theory and history.