“I am a very unusual artist. My whole life was devoted to doing what I alone could do.”¹ In this statement Alexander Medvedkin summed up his life’s work and struggles. He was a contemporary of the acknowledged pioneering Soviet filmmakers—Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Dovzhenko, Vertov, Esfir Shub, Kuleshov. Born in 1900, he was just two years younger than the youngest of them, Eisenstein. He outlived them all, dying in 1989, before the final collapse of Soviet Communism, in which he retained his fervent belief to the end. In his artistic legacy, he was a victim both of his originality and unorthodoxies and of the authorities in charge of film production and distribution. Much of his contribution to film was lost, suppressed, prevented, and ignored or forgotten. In the writings collected for this book, we see the support given to Medvedkin by Eisenstein and Dovzhenko and the writer Maxim Gorky, and later by the French filmmaker Chris Marker. In an article posthumously published (and transcripts of lectures to students), Eisenstein (“Medvedkin’s Chaplinesque Genius” [18])² enthusiastically testifies to Medvedkin’s originality and importance. When the evidence is considered, Medvedkin takes his rightful place alongside the major Soviet film directors of the first post-Revolutionary generation.

Medvedkin had an outstanding comic talent. The film Happiness (1934) is the principal surviving testimony to this talent. Eisenstein compared it to Chaplin’s (while specifying the Bolshevik director’s distinctive socialist treatment of his comic hero). He was also an experimentalist interested in transforming the practice of filmmaking. The most notable of his experiments was associated with his Kino-Train project in 1932, during the First Five-Year Plan. With it he took the production of film away from, and outside, the film studios, moving it into a mobile, traveling laboratory, projection room, and living quarters set up in three train cars, ready to be hitched onto a locomotive and moved to locations selected for their critical role in the country’s economy in this time of rapid collectivization and industrialization. The film screenings of the Kino-Train took place outside the established distribution networks, with the films being shown, in the first instance, on location to audiences who had participated in their
making. These audiences’ viewing experience was no ordinary one; there were public discussions after each screening in order to uncover the film’s bearing on the viewers’ own roles in the workplace and in society, and, correspondingly, the actions they could take to remove production obstacles and deadlocks. These viewers were engaged as participants and agents before, during, and after the making of the film. With regard to an earlier film, *On Patrol* (1927), Medvedkin said that “the viewer was on an equal footing with the author” inasmuch as the viewer was invited to propose solutions to problems of military strategy presented in the film. This was an interactive training exercise. In the Kino-Train project, filmmaking and viewing now had even more direct practical consequences: “The screenings would turn into production meetings.” The films found further use in other locations where industrial workers, collective farmers, and miners faced analogous problems.

Medvedkin’s revolutionary practice in film went beyond that of his major contemporaries. Although they were transforming the subject matter and the language of film, they were still working in studios or out of studios in major centers, and screening their films in movie theaters, workers clubs, and whatever facilities existed in villages. True, the studios were also undergoing transformations to ensure that they met the needs of the emerging Communist society; they were no longer private or joint-stock companies, and new internal committees and bureaucracies and overseeing bodies participated in artistic decisions and spoke for government policy. Challengingly, Medvedkin’s Kino-Train was a demonstration that filmmaking could be transformed from outside the dominant structures, as opposed to within them. His filmmaking practice was “unusual,” and even subversive.

There had been precedents for some aspects of filmmaking in the Kino-Train. The agit-trains in the immediate post-Revolutionary years brought films, plays, pamphlets, and posters from the towns to soldiers engaged in the Civil War and to civilians, in order to educate them about the new, post-October world and its challenges. Some of the agit-trains gathered documentary film material, which was brought back and edited in the studios (Vertov’s Kino-Eye films). But Medvedkin was concerned to stress the difference between his Kino-Train and the agit-trains: “The agit-trains had music—a gramophone, a singer, and folk instruments; they had a ready-made program, and were not concerned with local life.” In contrast, Medvedkin’s Kino-Train films were concerned with critical problems of local life—in factories and mines and on newly collectivized farms. There was another partial precedent for his practice in the small, temporary film stu-
dios set up to record work on some of the country’s major projects. These were removed from the major studios, but they were not mobile in the way the Kino-Train was, nor was their primary audience the workers involved in the projects and in the making of the films. In Medvedkin’s summation, “Nobody had mastered film as deeply and productively as our Kino-Train.” The contrast with Dziga Vertov’s films is instructive. Vertov’s Kino-Eye offers a director’s revolutionary way of seeing and visually constructing a world in transformation. In the first instance this revolutionary seeing is confined to the screen; its transformative effect on the world remains contingent. Medvedkin invented a distinctive form of engagé investigative documentary cinema, with its own place in the history of world film.

Medvedkin found his way to film from his experiences in the hard-fought Civil War that followed the October Revolution. He had been a fighter in the 1st Cavalry Army commanded by Semen Budenny, and there he also engaged in theatrical work aimed at bolstering the morale of his comrades-in-arms. His theatrical pieces helped the cavalrymen to laugh at the hardships of their everyday life, and at the same time educated them about the goals they were fighting for. Medvedkin was sensitive to the need to adapt this educational work to the men’s “wishes and interests.” He soon found that satire offered a productive way of combining his twin purposes of entertainment and education. His frontline theater proved to be both “an invaluable laboratory of comic art” and a great preparation for his subsequent work in film.

Medvedkin was a militant believer in the Communist, Bolshevik revolution. He carried his militancy with him from the frontlines of the Civil War to those of the First Five-Year Plan. In his trips or “sorties” on his Kino-Train in 1932 to the battlefields of industrialization, mine-works, and collectivization, he had a new weapon of attack—filmmaking, or rather filmmaking revolutionized and, moreover, taken to the limits of what was technically and humanly possible, so that in the space of three days he and his team would research a situation and write a script based on it; shoot, process, and edit a film; and last, screen it and hold public discussions of it. “The Kino-Train: 294 Days on Wheels” [2] is a firsthand account of this experiment. In terms of speed, what Medvedkin did is comparable to what is now readily done with digital cameras and computer editing. One great advantage he had was that he had an assured audience in a way that a filmmaker working outside the principal distribution systems and venues today cannot often hope to have, and what is more, an audience of actively involved viewers and “actors.”

Acknowledgment of Medvedkin’s role in the history of Soviet film was
long withheld. In part, this was precisely because he was working outside the established system and norms of Soviet film production. Authorities were suspicious of the Kino-Train films, which could not be vetted before and after production. As these films were, in the first instance, specific and local in use and intent, they could also easily escape notice and disappear. Jay Leyda, who was in Moscow in 1933–36, saw a few of these films (as well as the just-made satirical comedy *Happiness*), and referred to them in his history of Soviet film, *Kino*. But it is only in recent years that a number of the Kino-Train films have been rediscovered.

Another reason that Medvedkin’s place in Soviet film was marginalized had to do with his “unusual” preferred genre, satire. He found it an effective tool for educating his audiences and ridiculing abuses, corruption, and ignorance. What he could not prevent was that, even in the hands of a true believer, satire was prone to ambiguity. It was subversive. In our conversations about this book, Medvedkin said that the film *Happiness* “drives a stake into the peasant’s dream of attaining a kulak’s prosperity. That is a solution for just 1 percent. The kulak dream is mocked.” It is satirized. But for many viewers the central character of this film, Khmyr, who fails in his attempt to lead a rich peasant’s life, is more plausible as an incompetent and a misfit in any social order than as the reliable member of a collective farm he is meant to become. For authorities in the thirties, Khmyr and his precursors in the Kino-Train films were a troubling reminder of the widespread reluctance of peasants to hand over their livestock and landholdings, however meager, to collective farms. Poor peasants were not the stereotypical class enemy. And not all workers were suited for a collectively organized workforce.

In discussions with Stalin in 1934, Boris Shumiatsky, the man with major responsibility for the Soviet film industry, said that filmmakers were afraid of the comic genre because of the possibility of satire in it. Shumiatsky was no doubt including himself among the fearful and distrustful film workers. It is a fact that Medvedkin’s major completed satiric film, *Happiness*, saw limited distribution following its release in 1935, and was suppressed in 1937. The original negative disappeared, as did the positive copies with a color sequence (see the note “The Suppression of *Happiness*” [24]). The film did not surface again until its screening at the Moscow Film Festival in 1959. In the early sixties it was seen by Chris Marker at the Brussels Cinemathèque; struck by its originality, he did what he could to assure its recognition as a major cinematic achievement.

Medvedkin’s exploration of comic satire met with an untimely end. His major project, the film to which he wished to devote himself after *Happi-
ness, was “The Unholy Force” [12]. Its scope was ambitious—an exploration of the unhappy lot of the Russian peasantry. It was a satirical attack on the old, pre-Revolutionary social order and on the still-potent forces of religion, but it also suggested that the Russian peasant might always be, by nature, a rebel, for whom there could be no ideal society. The film was stopped by Shumiatsky himself in 1935, on the eve of the day shooting was set to begin. Medvedkin’s creative efforts for many years after this were largely devoted to multiple revisions of the script in a continuing attempt to get approval to make the film.

During the years devoted to “The Unholy Force,” Medvedkin made other films—two comedies in particular, The Miracle Worker (1936) and New Moscow (1938), and many documentaries. But he speaks dismissively of much of this other work, or passes over it. He had a “passion for satire”; ordinary film comedies were “fundamentally alien to me.” He does give special attention to one experimental documentary project he undertook during World War II (“Soldiers Shooting Films” [3]). Medvedkin’s “Second ‘Autobiography’” [22] suggests that he turned to his other documentary work after 1949 as a substitute for the work he really wanted to do, while the fairly descriptive summaries he gives of the films—on topics such as colonialism, the arms race, militarism, and ecological crises—indicate that for him the films were a continuing contribution to the building of socialism. They also tantalizingly suggest that these films challenge mainstream “Western” perspectives on these topics. Nonetheless, throughout this period, the unmade film “The Unholy Force” remained his major preoccupation, and, with his continued work on the script, this literary work was a major outlet for his creativity.

Medvedkin’s literary talent was indeed considerable. In it he was much influenced by the Russian satirical writer Saltykov-Shchedrin. His ear was attuned to the pithy, graphic sayings of the people. He liked to quote them and also to develop them as metaphors informing his plots. He knew well, too, the chants of the Russian Orthodox church services, and remembered the beauty and power of their language, and was not afraid to draw on this vocal and choral tradition, even though he mocked the dogmas underlying it. In “The Unholy Force,” with its epic struggle waged by peasants against the forces of Heaven and Hell, he was also influenced by fairy tales, folk legends, and the graphic art of traditional woodblock cartoons. Stylistically, the film might have been a major development of the distinctive caricatural realism he developed in Happiness.

There is a fundamental paradox in Medvedkin’s satirical position. Satire was, as he ruefully remembered, “a double-edged sword.” He sought
to limit its implications and to remain faithful to Communist ideals. It was easy to attack narrow-minded blockheads and officials who abused their positions. But he did not wish to generalize the attack and, in so doing, imply that certain power structures invited abuse or, alternatively, that human nature was impervious to social engineering. Possibly he was even blind to the suggestions and implications of his satires, maybe deliberately blind. He had been a revolutionary fighting for Bolshevik Communism, and he never allowed himself to question what Communism became. It is strange that his outings on the Kino-Train took him to places, such as eastern Ukraine, where mass starvation was resulting from the drive to collectivize agriculture, and yet the evidence of hunger never enters into his field of vision (not all of his peasants are sound and robust, but the emaciation of a Khmyr in *Happiness* is no more than an aspect of his characterization).

Other silences appear in his writings. The picture of the Civil War that Medvedkin gives in “Cavalry Days” [1] comes from the perspective of a strong, healthy young man who enjoyed the rigors and comradeship of army life. It is centered on his discovery of himself as an artist and on the role art could play in the life of the Revolutionary army. Little in this account points to the ruthlessness and brutality of the war that are so striking in the *Red Army* tales of Isaak Babel, who, interestingly, fought in the same 1st Cavalry Army as Medvedkin. A particularly glaring omission in the writings has to be any mention of the Terror. A side effect, such as the years of low film production, warrants a mention in his “Second ‘Autobiography’ ” [22], but not the Terror as such. Medvedkin was of course aware of it, and he did barely allude to it in filmed interviews with Marina Goldovskaia [23] made in the last months of his life. As for Stalin himself, it is possible that Medvedkin accepted that Stalin was or had to be above and beyond human criteria and judgment, as Nikolai Izvolov suggests in his reading of the treatment of the supreme, all-powerful leader in his appearance at the end of the film *The Miracle Worker* (see “Alexander Medvedkin and the Traditions of Russian Film” [20]).

Medvedkin’s autobiographical writings indicate that he was happier to attribute his difficulties in film to wreckers and opportunistic bureaucrats than to a system and leader that had a restrictive view of the kind of art that was necessary and appropriate. The opportunists and intriguers certainly existed, but it is also true that Socialist Realism had become entrenched in film by the time he was seeking approval to shoot the satirical “Unholy Force,” with its ambiguities and defiance of now-entrenched conventions.
Stylistically his explorations had taken him very far away from the naturalistic realism that lay at the base of Socialist Realism. He had a great gift for visually and dramatically caricaturing social types; and often they even have the freedom of movement of characters in cartoons. In 1933 Medvedkin wrote that “hyperbole” was his basic method of transforming material in Happiness: “In taking material from folklore, the film turns it into a realistic conception by means of hyperbole.” In effect, he was advocating a form of “hyperbolic realism.”

There are, not surprisingly, parallels and precedents for Medvedkin’s comic turns and imagination—in the film work of Mack Sennett, Charlie Chaplin, Fatty Arbuckle, and others. But Medvedkin was a highly original artist, in the perhaps perverse sense that he sometimes had to make his own discoveries for himself, alone or in collaboration with his actors. Medvedkin did not necessarily need the example of American (Canadian, English) directors and actors to come to his own findings; moreover, his comic turns and theirs often had a common source in older forms of popular entertainment, such as burlesque clowning, variety shows, and the circus. In the context of Russian cultural politics, however, there is a significant connection to be made between the use Medvedkin made of the lesser, popular theatrical forms and the use made of them by the great theatrical director Meyerhold. Medvedkin’s Civil War plays for cavalrymen and his later film work drew on the circus, fairground attractions, street theater, mime, and masks in his quest to cross the barrier between the stage and the audience in order to engage the imagination of his viewers. These lesser theatrical forms were also major sources of inspiration for Meyerhold in his radically revolutionary stagings of Russian classics (and of plays by his contemporary, Maiakovskiy). Running through Medvedkin’s writings on his cavalry days and on the Kino-Train [1, 2] is a quiet subtext acknowledging his affinity for the inspiration and strivings of the great leftist director. Meyerhold’s free vision and ambitions led to his execution; Medvedkin survived, while enduring a slow artistic death, which he likened to a drawn-out “Golgotha,” with its implications of a way of sorrows and a crucifixion.

The idea for a book collecting Medvedkin’s film writings originated with Jay Leyda. The book would bear witness to a life in film that had been forgotten, suppressed, marginalized, and truncated. Medvedkin was naturally excited by this prospect. The material for the book existed in his archive of scripts and autobiographical and critical writings written over the years. He actively cooperated in assembling the material for the book. In its final form, the Medvedkin book does not correspond in all respects
to the book agreed upon by Leyda and Medvedkin; certain omissions and changes were necessary for reasons given below, in the “History of The Alexander Medvedkin Reader” [28]. Despite the omissions, this book provides rich testimony, direct and indirect, to the talent and inventiveness of a great and revolutionary filmmaker.

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