

Television: a new weapon for the new imperialist war

by Samuel Brody

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Special Section: Film and Photo League
— Sarah Miller

We are sad to announce the death of Sam Brody on September 9, 1987, at the age of 80. Brody was one the founders of the Workers Film and Photo league. His documentary film work and writings continue to interest and inspire us. He helped to produce many films for organized labor and some of his early still photographs and films were of important strikes of the day: the 1926 textile strike in Passaic, NJ and the 1929 strike in Gastonia, NC. He was a cameraperson for the F&PL at the 1931 and 1932 hunger marches on Washington, DC.

The four articles which follow include two pieces by Brody and two reviews of books covering the League and its participants. For an extensive treatment of the League, see the entire section on "Radical Cinema in the 30's: Film and Photo League" in JUMP CUT, No. 14 (\$2.00 U.S., \$2.50 foreign), which includes an interview with Sam Brody and two more articles by him.

We are very grateful to Leo Seltzer, also one of the founders of the League, who generously supplied most of the illustrations for this special section. He still sells, distributes and goes out speaking with several of the League's films. For more info, write him at 368 E. 69th St. NYC, 10021.

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*We are reprinting below an incredibly prophetic article on television Brody wrote for **The Daily Worker** June 14, 1930. — eds.*

Television is now a fact. Like all great inventions born amidst the chaos and isolation of scientific research in capitalist society, it came like a bolt from the sky, with all the padded atmosphere of "magic" and "wizardry" that ushered in the telephone, the phonograph, and the radio.

To the working masses these inventions come indeed like miracles born of wizards' brains. The wide gap which divides them from the monopolized realms of science and art is glaringly obvious here and is the result of an ever more defined division of labor in society with a class "top" and "bottom."

The Sunday magazine sections of every capitalist paper carry loud and boisterous articles on the "blessings of our modern life" with all the marvels of science at the reach of the humblest of Americans. Think of it, television in your own home!

In the United States, too, the "means of mental production" are the monopoly of the ruling class. Anarchy in the sphere of science is an extension of the disorganization and chaos inherent in capitalist economy.

The sound film came along one day, coached and fed by the late Sam Warner. Thus a whole industry was thrown out of joint. Today there are some ninety-four different patented sound systems. The same is true of the color film and also of a much simpler innovation, wide film.

And so with television. Hollywood is already hysterical. Soon its "big bosses" — the former haberdashers, wholesale cloth-spongers and store-keepers — will be tearing at each other's throats. Already they have put their feet in the new field. But the air has long ago been monopolized by the giants: A.T.T., R.C.A., Western Electric and General Electric. In the next two years we will witness the complete merging of these engineering trusts with the financial powers of the screen. By the very nature of television the motion picture barons will be at a disadvantage in all this.

And just as today you are able to listen to Will Rogers under the auspices of Squibbs Dental Cream, so tomorrow you will have the possibility of both seeing and hearing Greta Garbo or Rowdie Vallup under the auspices of the Kwiktie Shoelace Corporation.

The glorious wedding of art, sciences and advertising.

A Wall Street synthesis.

But what is the more serious aspect in the coming of this mighty photo-electric eye?

Not an invention is made — even a minor one — but that its adaptability to war is immediately considered and perfected. This is especially true in this period of frantic preparation for the impending explosion. In a previous article we have shown how the sound film is exploited to perfect the war machine. In the case of television this is even more the case.

The same day that the enlarged television projector was demonstrated in the laboratories of the General Electric Co. at Schenectady, Dr. E.F.W. Alexanderson, its inventor, said to the assembled newspapermen:

"What will this mean in the war of the future, when a staff officer can see the enemy through the television eyes of his scouting planes, or when they can send a bombing plane without a man on board, which can see the target and be steered by radio up to the moment when it hits?"

Dr. Alexanderson, with all the perspicacity of his specialized brain, visualizes another valuable aspect of his device:

"Television will be a great asset to politicians. The day is likely to come when candidates for president of the United States will campaign on television."

A supreme propaganda method for bringing capitalist propaganda into the worker's home.

A weapon superior to the newspaper, more effective than the film, more effective than the radio!

Such is science in the hands of militant American imperialism.

Television broadcasting will be of two kinds. Motion pictures will be broadcast from master film prints with synchronized sound and talk and "real" events will be transmitted through the medium of radio cameras.

The first method will correspond to the so-called entertainment film as we know it in the movies. The second process will amount to an infinite extension of the present sound newsreel or documentary film. This will be the medium which then as now will have the advantage of being most effective from the psychological standpoint. Its power lies in that its authenticity can never be questioned by the onlooker.

Comrade Leon Moussinac, no doubt the ablest living authority on motion picture theory, long ago established it as axiomatic that "in the motion picture the feeling of reality is indispensable for the creation of emotion." [1] This "feeling of reality" is the very essence of picture facts, as the Soviet director, Vertov, calls filmed documents. In this respect the film created on the basis of an artificial scenario is infinitely inferior to powerful documents like TURKSIB, SHANGHAI DOCUMENT or the average newsreel.

Another advantage of the documentary film as a propagator of ideas is its extreme flexibility. The television camera will lend itself to the same authentic lies as the motion picture camera.

In 1924, during a public discussion in Moscow, Dziga Vertov revealed an heretofore unpublished statement by Lenin urging the complete transformation of Soviet Russia's motion picture repertoire on the basis of the documentary of "unplayed" film. What would Lenin have said about television, he who considered the movies "the art which for us is the most important."

Technology has given the answer to the long-standing controversy of fact versus fiction in the movies. Television has uncanned the film. Television has rendered the acted film amateurish and backward.

In the Soviet Union such an invention would be used to raise the cultural level of the workers and peasants. It would be applied for the advancement and true progress of the formerly oppressed national minorities. For that same purpose they are now using the movies and the radio at the present time.

There television will be used to help build socialism and a better world for the laboring masses.

Here it will be used for "entertainment" and for bombing planes; for commercial advertising and for capitalist politicians.

NOTES

1. *Birth of the Movies*. Paris, 1925.