

3 IN THE KINGDOM OF SHADOWS: TENT CINEMA AND COLLABORATIVE ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH IN SIBERIA

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Fig. 5 *Agit Kino*, iteration no.3. Old Bakery and Emporium Gallery in Austin, Texas, 2023.

Introduction

This essay constitutes a reflection on a multi-staged art exhibition titled *Agit Kino* that has been exhibited in three locations across the USA and Canada between 2009 and 2023. The exhibition follows many years of anthropological and historical research centered on the lives of Indigenous Evenki people in parts of Krasnoyarsk Territory and northern Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) in Central Siberia. That research has consisted of collaboration, consultation, archival investigation, and ethnographic writing on subjects ranging from travel and mobility to socialist cultural construction, photography, film, and memory. The centering idea of the *Agit Kino* project has been to create a cinema within a gallery. “*Agit Kino*” (from the Russian abridged name meaning “Agitational Cinema”) takes the form of a large canvas expedition or wall tent, similar to those used as a mobile dwelling by many Indigenous peoples across the Siberian boreal landscape. The canvas tent is a ubiquitous boreal architecture, introduced in the 19th century and used for generations by Indigenous peoples around the

circumpolar north. In the early 20th century itinerant projectionists discovered that canvas tents offered portability, walls that doubled as a screen, and of course a capacity to provide shelter from elemental forces. The tent, in other words, provided an ideal surface to entertainers, educators, and activists for showing movies. The *Agit Kino* project pulls the tent cinema from the boreal forest and sets it in the unlikely space of the art gallery; rather than playing films aimed at drawing Indigenous peoples into “modernity,” I have used the tent cinema to introduce North American audiences to Indigenous Siberian worlds.

The paper introduces the reader to the history of the moving image in Russia and Siberia, and more specifically how it was used as a tool for pedagogical and propaganda campaigns. I describe the three different iterations of the *Agit Kino* project. The most recent two iterations have been organized around my work with Artem, a collaborator from Evenkiia¹ in the Krasnoyarsk Territory. We had originally begun a collaboration prior to the Covid-19 pandemic on a project titled “River life in the Shadow of a Dam.” When the project was stalled by Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, we pivoted to work on an iteration of *Agit Kino* that would actively explore our friendship as well as Artem’s love for the natural beauty of his homeland. The chapter concludes with ruminations on anthropological research in a time of war.

Mise-en-scène

In the months before we began to learn about the world-altering scale of the Covid-19 pandemic, I was in Siberia, on research leave from University of Texas. While giving a series of lectures on visual anthropology in Novosibirsk, I was preparing to return to a distant northern village after over a decade of being away. The project I was working on focused on a proposed (but never built) hydroelectric dam (Campbell and Ablazhey 2023). Given the increasingly capricious character of Russian power at that time, the research foregrounded cultural expressions of affinity for the river rather than an assessment of corporate pressure, corruption, dirty tricks, or structural inequality. I pitched a project that was about my informants’ love for a river; how a people, who only a few generations earlier had lived primarily nomadic lives, have adapted to a sedentarism connected to more conventional circuits of Soviet and now Russian national life. As the Lower Tunguska River was one of the few non-industrialized rivers of its size in Russia, I wanted to know more about the ways in which this river mattered to the local community and particularly to the Evenki who have lived in the area since time immemorial.

1 Evenkiia is officially known as the Evenki Municipal District. Formerly, the Evenki Autonomous Okrug (EAO). It was created in the Soviet era as a kind of homeland for the Evenki people who are widely dispersed across Siberia and the Russian Far East. The EAO lost its status as such in 2007.

With support from my friend Artem,² an Evenki vet technician, the plan for the “River life” project was to travel by boat down the Lower Tunguska River to visit a series of small villages. Beginning with Tura, a small regional hub, we would visit villages in the proposed flood zone of the hydroelectric dam: Nidym, Uchami, Tutonchani. According to conventional ethnographic methods, I had planned on many informal interviews set within the routines of everyday life. Making photographs, shooting video, and recording audio were to be a central part of the project with a goal of working towards an illustrated monograph and a modest travelling exhibition that could be shown in villages and regional centers in Siberia as well as at art galleries and museums in North America. This travelling exhibition was inspired by an earlier art installation titled *Agit Kino* which I had shown in Philadelphia’s Crane Arts Gallery in 2009.

By March of 2020 it was increasingly evident that the Corona virus was becoming a global pandemic and that I would need to return to home to Texas. Most importantly, I was keenly aware that I did not want to become a vector responsible for spreading disease in the area, which at that time had no reported cases of Covid-19. My research plans had become potentially toxic, so I left my friends in Novosibirsk, having never made the return trip to the villages along the Lower Tunguska River.

For two years during the pandemic, Artem and I shared stories, photographs, and videos over a secure messaging app. At first, they were cloistered shots of family bubbles; then they shifted to images of masked people in small public gatherings. Most images were solitary scenes of hiking, boating, fishing, campfires by the river, or small gatherings of close kin. They gradually became depictions that were more public and less masked, registering the possibilities afforded by shifting social forms associated with social distancing. Over this period, we shared hundreds of photographs of everyday life. He shared videos of motoring up the Kochechum River, photographs of a child’s birthday party, a friend holding a freshly caught giant trout, images from the *bania* or grilling *shashliki* – all scenes that I was intimately familiar with. They were scenes that established the health and happiness of Artem and his kin. They expressed the basic values of a good life that only occasionally were marked by contemporary events: photographs of people social distancing and wearing masks and later an image of a few trucks with “Z” stickers on the bumpers.

By early 2022 my friend Artem and I were again developing summer plans to visit villages and conduct interviews about river life on the Lower Tunguska. Just as global travel was becoming a possibility again, Russia began amassing troops on its borders with Ukraine. What weeks before had seemed impossible became a new grim reality. On 28 February, Artem sent me a TikTok video of scenes from Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and their march on Kyiv. Another friend sent me pictures of her children playing in Krasnoyarsk on a vacation. “They don’t know that we’re at war”

2 Artem is not only a pseudonym but also a concatenation of several different people to protect the identities of my collaborators.

she said. Desperate requests to help with visas, asylum claims, and border crossings soon followed in quick succession. Many friends and acquaintances were quickly looking for ways to get out of Russia. One person asked me to advise their sister on how to get a visa to Canada. Another friend informed me that a relation was on his way to Mexico: maybe I could pick him up when he reaches the border with Texas? He had just left Turkey, they were not sure where he was right then, but I should be ready.

It was not only clear that travel to Russia would be unsafe for me as a Canadian-American citizen, but collaboration was increasingly in danger of exposing my partners and collaborators to unwanted state scrutiny (see Dudeck 2024 – eds.). Political toxicity follows its own logics but is analogously like patterns of transmission in an epidemic. The actual threats posed by collaboration were unclear, the possibility of transmission uncertain, and ultimately the danger posed by contact indeterminate. What actually constituted exposure? Was I testing positive as an enemy of the State? When Oleg Khramov, Deputy Secretary of the Russian Security Council, was interviewed in October of 2022, he spoke on the patriotic, spiritual, and moral dangers facing Russia after seven months of what was becoming an intractable “Special Military Operation.” He described subversive efforts from foreign agents:

The information available in the Russian Security Council indicates the readiness of the United States and its allies to adjust their tactics taking into account the assessment of the dynamics of changes in the situation and to develop new approaches to subversive work to reformat the consciousness of Russians. To solve this problem, Washington and London are attracting multidisciplinary groups of specialists in the fields of mathematics, information security, anthropology and ethnology, systems theory and systems analysis, social psychology and psycholinguistics. This cannot go unanswered.³

Khramov’s statement escalated the conditions of paranoid sociality far beyond anything I had seen in Russia since I began working there in the mid-1990s. I could no longer safely conduct research in Siberia and the danger of collaborating with me as a Canadian-USA ethnographer was real even when the collaboration was focused on subjects that pose no threat to the state. In the countless photographs and videos shared



Fig. 2 Silhouettes in front of a partially deconstructed tent. Outtakes from *The Ewenki on the Banks of the Argun River*, Zhang 1959.

3 <https://rg.ru/2022/10/17/zashchita-ot-nekulturnyh.html> [accessed 11.07.2024]

between Artem and me, there was no espionage, there was no real threat to the state's hegemony on Russia's "patriotic, spiritual, and moral" integrity. We see only evidence of the colorful continuity of ordinary life on the banks of a river in central Siberia.

Kingdom of Shadows: early years of cinema in Siberia

Last night I was in the Kingdom of Shadows. If you only knew how strange it is to be there. It is a world without sound, without color. Everything there – the earth, the trees, the people, the water and the air – is dipped in monotonous grey. Grey rays of the sun across the grey sky, grey eyes in grey faces, and the leaves of the trees are ashen grey. It is not life but its shadow, it is not motion but its soundless specter.⁴

It was 1896 when the acclaimed socialist writer Maxim Gorky wrote the article "Last Night I was in the Kingdom of Shadows."⁵ He was in Nizhny-Novgorod at the All-Russian Fair of Industry and Art when he witnessed a screening at the very earliest cinema.⁶ It was barely a year since Louis Lumière screened the minute-long *Arrival of the Train* at a Paris café and only a few months since Russia's first screening in St. Petersburg. Gorky's poetic and morally troubled response to the screening was echoed in other "first contact"⁷ narratives that placed the body of the spectator at the center of analysis. According to Loiperdinger and Elzer,

(the) cinema's first audiences are interpreted as being unable to distinguish between the film image and reality. *Arrival of the Train* thus is not simply used as an icon of cinema's birth [but it] stands as a striking example of the manipulative power allegedly inherent in cinema since its beginnings. It serves to illustrate cinema's inherent suggestive forces, elevated to a basic principle. While the fear and panic of the audience facing Lumière's locomotive is retold in the form of an anecdote, its status reaches much higher: reiterated over and over again, it figures as the founding myth of the medium, testifying to the power of film over its spectators (Loiperdinger and Elzer 2004: 92).

The moving image was new, the still image was not. By the 1890s, a generation of people around the world had grown up with the photographic image in their lives, as photography became increasingly accessible. Rapid technological advances (from flexible film to smaller cameras and lenses) allowed for many more people to make pictures. This lowered the cost of photographs and began a process of photographic

4 This passage has been quoted widely in film studies. It was made famous in Leda Swan's translation of Gorky's pseudonymously written article for the *Nizhegorodski Listok*. (Swan in Leyda 1983: 407)

5 <https://picturegoing.com/?p=230> [accessed 11.07.2024]

6 Lebedev 1965. See also: Plotnikova 2024.

7 Beja 2012

democratization. Far away from Novgorod, photographic mediation in the context of encounters between Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous merchants, colonial agents, and missionaries were increasing. By the turn of the century there would have been few people in Siberia (or anywhere, really) “untouched” by the uncanny fidelity of still photography. The moving photography that Maxim Gorky witnessed in the last days of the nineteenth century, however, was indeed new; the verisimilitude of frozen life gave way to the shocking novelty of gesture and motion. Cinema’s fictive realism expressed as impossible desire and remediated through literary fictions became a profoundly disruptive force in the world.

A travelling projectionist named S.O. Marzhetsky brought the moving image to Siberia in the Autumn of 1896 with the first screening likely in Tyumen. The great film historian of Siberia, Viktor Vatolin, quotes a description of Marzhetsky’s screenings from an article in *Permskie Novosti*:

[...]A number of live scenes take place on the screen, for example: fire and rescue, cyclists riding, a card scandal, street life in Moscow and so on. Before you, let’s say, is the last of these scenes. The scene represents Nikolskaya Street in Moscow just opposite Brocard’s famous perfume shop. Along the street you see the movement of people of different professions: servants, high school students, officials – on foot and in carriages. There was a crowd of people, the coachman stopped the horse. Having cleared the path, he continues it. Here is a village woman gaping at the passers-by and stopping; a gentleman walking behind pushes her, as if saying: ‘Why did you stop? Go ahead or give way!’ But here comes a young respectable man walking anxiously. Suddenly he remembered that he had forgotten something – quickly hitting himself in the forehead with his finger, he turns and walks hastily back. And other scenes of the same kind. The impression is amazingly effective: you seem to be involuntarily placed in the environment. (Vatolin 2002)

Marzhetsky (and soon others) would go on to screen moving images across Siberian cities and regional centers: Tomsk, Tyumen, Yekaterinburg, Omsk, Krasnoyarsk.

The Trans-Siberian rail allowed for the rapid expansion of cinema across Siberia. I have yet to find any accounts of the impressions of Evenki or other Indigenous people when they first encountered moving images (or photographs for that matter). Indigenous peoples of the North were a well-known subject to the colonial powers of the “mainland” Russia and the West. The Arctic figured heavily in scientific and literary imagination. It was a site of exploration, of drama and challenge where “man” faced “nature” *in extremis*. Indigenous peoples of the North figured into those figurations with the 19th Century fixation on the “primitive,” as well as in the theories of cultural evolution and social change. Socialists and Capitalists alike had to accommodate the remarkable difference of Indigenous peoples in their all-encompassing theories of the world.

Evenki and other ethnic minorities of Siberia were quickly pulled into the cine-

matic enterprise. Damiens writes about *Samoyed Boy* (1928) an agit-prop animated film about a Nenets boy's salvation at the hands of Russian Communists and how cinematic technology "was envisaged as a privileged instrument for modernization in the fight against the beliefs of the past that the regime wished to eliminate." (Damiens 2019:75). In other parts of Siberia Indigenous peoples first appeared in proto-documentary reels but soon after in narrative films like *The Avenger* [Mstisl 1930] (Kuz'menko and Maksimova 2019) and *Tungus from the Khenychar* [1930] (Campbell 2023). After the Revolution communist administrators set about building permanent cultural centers across the Soviet Union (Campbell 2014), among the facilities they included the means to screen films. But before the construction of culture bases and "houses of culture" (Grant 1995), before electricity arrived in the Arctic, hand-cranked film projectors were used by itinerant projectionists. When they visited nomadic camps, they projected onto tents. The traveling film exhibitors could set up their projectors in front of or behind the wall of a tent. When it was behind the screen, the absence of the projector-apparatus and the beam of light enhanced the effect of surprise and the delight of the audience surprised by "the suddenness of fragments of real life appearing on the screen out of nowhere" (Vatolin 2002).

Before the 1917 Revolution, the Evenki were busy making their own representations of the Russians, Poles, Germans, Americans, and others who visited their lands, just as they had for hundreds of years. They shared dramatic stories, tales of horror and humor, as well as myriad other genre-warping narratives reflected in their own cosmology of demons and shamans, hungry ghosts, animal kin, love, desire, and deceit.⁸ The kind of stories that government agents, missionaries, and ethnographers were beginning to tell about the Evenki was rapidly shifting. Evenki bodies entered into photographic record in the late 19th Century. When moving pictures arrived it was not long before the exotic (to Europeans) world of Evenkis became fodder for the screen. Besides ethnologists, there were few who were really interested in paying attention to difference among Indigenous peoples of the Circumpolar North. More often they were represented as just that: a lumping of many different people, beliefs, economic practices, arts, histories, desires, and dreams into a singular register of polar difference from "civilization" and "modernity." They were simply "natives" [*Tuzemtsy*], undifferentiated in their "backwards" and inscrutable ways. Some filmmakers, like Robert Flaherty, saw value in the irreducible particularity of people and strove for some version of accuracy on the screen. For Flaherty, Inuit (to him "Eskimo") bodies were exotic and the story of their remarkably different way of living in the world became a point of fascination (Raheja 2007, Flaherty 1998 [1922], Fienup-Riordan 1995). In Russia, Damiens notes the importance of an emergent documentary form aimed at creating a "Cine-atlas of the USSR": films of an "ethnographic nature" expanded from 70 in 1925 to 200 in 1930 (2017:74. See also Perevalova 2018).

8 Personal field work notes but see also Brandišauskas 2018. On Even storytelling and folklore see Ulturgasheva 2017 as well as Sharina and Kuzmina 2022.



Fig. 3 Outtakes from *Hundreds of Homes*. Aaltonen and Lappalainen, 1992, 1959.

Traveling cinema among the Indigenous citizens of the Russian north

After the 1917 revolution, communist proselytization of northern peoples in Siberia began in earnest. Cinematic technology arrived in remote communities even before the Bolsheviks built permanent settlements. This was typically called “travelling cinema” [*kinoperedvizhka*] though sometimes it was also known as the “nomadic cinema” [*kochevoe kino*]. They were typically associated with the “red tents” – a mobile program for education and propaganda that followed nomadic peoples. The historian M. G. Agapov notes the importance placed on the cinema for “enlightenment” work among Indigenous peoples (2023).⁹ In my own work on the history of socialist cultural transformation projects in Evenkiia I found archival documents that outlined the kinds of films that were recommended to be shown to Indigenous peoples. Chief among them were films that agitated for nomads to send their children to residential schools, that campaigned for the liquidation of illiteracy, that showed the work of the Komsomol (youth wing of the Communist Party) among school children as well as

9 See also Taylor (1979, 2008), and Youngblood (1985, 2013).

the ways in which schools were undertaking anti-religious and anti-shaman activities. Soviets also believed that films could shed light on the way to improve Indigenous living conditions through: “Comparison of the sanitary-hygienic conditions of housing of different peoples of the North. Illustrative facts concerning the grubbiness of separate tribes, especially Yuraks [Low Yenisei Nenets]. Ideal results of health education in their adaptation to contemporary native dwellings. The advantage of cottages over tents in the forest zone.” (Archival source quoted in Campbell 2014: 106). The expectation that educational film could help rapidly “raise the cultural level” of Indigenous peoples in the north was a key part of Soviet policy. According to Agapov:

“Red Tents” were equipped with radio, photo and film equipment. Where there were no cinema projectors, it was prescribed to make do with “at least a magic lantern” until they were obtained [1930]. The Tobolsk district committee of the CPSU(b) demanded [...] “Voices from the other side of the earth and ‘living pictures’ were the most important help for the soviet ‘missionaries’ in ‘native’ territories.” (Agapov 2023: 191).

Soviet “missionaries” modeled their proselytization on that of Christian missionaries and they shared their techniques in journals and professional training schools (Gérin 2003, Quijada 2020, Leete and Vallikivi 2011). Their pedagogy was one built on ideals of socialist liberation, designed at first by urban revolutionaries but later fine-tuned by anthropologists and others with intimate knowledge of Indigenous societies. Still later it became the work of Indigenous cadres trained to work among their own people.

For over a decade itinerant projectionists traveled rivers and reindeer paths to settlements where they would show news reels, animations, and propaganda pieces. By the 1930s, “houses of culture” were built across the Soviet North. These were permanent centralized facilities made explicitly for cultural transformation, designed to “uplift” Indigenous peoples from their “backwards” cultural traditions. At the time, these spectacles of modernity were meant to impart a sense of wonder and transformation for the world promised by Soviet socialism. The force of these ideas was multiplied through the programmatic nature and architectural replication of culture bases across the North. The wording of Soviet socialism saw itself as a future-building project.

The Soviet project was not interested in the exclusive use of Indigenous bodies (marked “exotic”) for southern audiences and markets. Instead, it was driven by socialist logics. Indigenous peoples themselves were imagined as audiences, as they were for pedagogical projects in Canada and other circumpolar countries (Warrington 2021, Fienup-Riordan 1995, Alexander 2023). Pedagogy and entertainment overlapped in the Soviet project that saw all film as doing political work and strove in various ways to control and shape that work. Films like *Mstitel* and *Tungus s Kheychara* were multipurposed. *Tungus s Kheychara*, for example played in New York City

in 1930 as *Law of the Siberian Taiga*, in Germany it was circulated as *Das Gesetz der Taiga* and in France as *La Loi Qui Commande* (Campbell 2023). Yet these films, shown across the USSR and internationally, were meant also to circulate in the tundra and taiga. In other words, Indigenous peoples in Russia were also imagined as cinema goers. They were no less exoticized, but this exoticization occurred according to an alternate episteme that had different effects. Their difference was less novelty (though it was that too) than it was a narrative tool for telling stories about Socialist salvation, nobility, honesty, primitive communism (Slezkine 1997), hard work, etc.



Fig. 4 Archival photograph courtesy of Krasnoyarsk Krai Regional Museum. Item no. kkkm_052-011. Date: Unknown; Photographer: Unknown; Archivist's description: "A tent, a skeleton of a teepee, a sled with a load and a native with a dog in the tundra."

Tent cinema

Historical research on tent cinema is limited: technical details (like the type of projectors used and the generators that powered them) and formal details of film distribution across the vast expanses of Indigenous Siberia have received little scholarly attention.¹⁰ I had hoped to explore these aspects however, my research has been delayed by pandemic and war.

Through the 1920s and 1930s, a corps of dedicated communist agitators travelled through remote regions of Siberia. One of the most compelling cultural interventions they produced was the mobile cinema. Setting up their projectors in tents, shacks, and cabins they cast the shimmering images of distant scenes and exotic stories (for the Evenki) into the taiga landscape. Itinerant projectionists and mobile cinemas were one of a host of technological interventions in the lives of Indigenous Siberians prior to the construction of permanent cultural facilities and the forced sedentarization of nomadic hunters and reindeer herders. Along with Western-style medicine, the cinematic apparatus introduced a powerful and persuasive new way of being and imagining that reinforced otherness but simultaneously helped to interpolate Indigenous peoples into an internationalist and inclusive project of radical cultural transformation.

When Bolsheviks worked their way into the northerly regions of the Yenisei River, into central Siberia, they brought their own representations of the capitalist, imperialist, and colonialist worlds they despised. Among their tools for translating and mediating these worlds was the tent cinema. Itinerant cinema of Siberia borrows the architectural socialities of the tent. The cinema created the space in which an informal social contract prevailed, in which the crowd became an audience attendant to another time and place. The cinema kept the “real” world a bay long enough for this other world to emerge, regardless of films’ designation as narrative or fiction. The spectacle of the tent is one that is witnessed and felt on the inside and the out. In the early 20th century canvas tents became more pervasive in the Yenisei landscape. Undoubtedly of much more significance to increasingly intensified encounters enabled by the projects of socialist construction was the “culture base.” *Turinskaia Kul’tbaza* was one of the first culture bases. It was built in 1927 to support the construction of socialism among Indigenous peoples in the burgeoning village of Tura, at the confluence of the Kochechum and Lower Tunguska Rivers.

Where the revolutionary mobile cinema was originally part of an agitation and propaganda campaign it was rapidly co-opted as a pedagogical tool in the work of socialist cultural construction across the North. The appeal for local audiences was likely curiosity and diversion or entertainment: a film screening also offered the experience of technological novelty, the conviviality of gathering together, and sometimes of food and drink. In perhaps more ways than the original agitators realized,

¹⁰ There is however some promising work by Damiens (2017) and Agapov (2023).

the tent cinema produced a space of cross-cultural encounter. The Red Tent was a third space in the extensive transformations of socialist construction. While the larger project of International Socialism imagined a post-national/post-racial/post-ethnic subject, the tent cinema was also a place where Evenki continued to imagine their own futurity. As a third space (Soja 1996) the cinema tent was neither wholly Russian/Soviet nor was it wholly Indigenous.

The canvas walled tent itself was only beginning to come into use by Indigenous peoples in the Yenisei North in the 19th Century. Soon it would displace the traditional conical *d'iu* (or *chum* in Russian, akin to *teepee*) as a preferred winter dwelling. Evenki and other aboriginal people in the north are famously pragmatic (Anderson 2006), adopting technological innovations that facilitate their mode of life and the survival of their cultural practices. The canvas tent was lighter and easier to maintain than traditional skin-covered tents. One trade-off was that woven canvas was a non-local material that bound them to external worlds well beyond their control: canvas was produced from flax or cotton or hemp in the South, it was woven in the South, and it was distributed by traders, state-run cooperatives or acquired as industrial and military surplus. Each of these factors contributed to potentially fragile networks of distribution.

According to David Anderson (2006:12), most Evenki have told him “that conical tents command a different behaviour than canvas tents.” In the post-Soviet era, “the resources churned up by de-militarisation and de-industrialisation have allowed Evenki to elaborate a complex taiga lifestyle built of canvas, plastic, as well as ungulate skins” (Anderson 2006: 2). It is precisely this kind of observation born of keen ethnographic attention that has drawn me to this portable architecture and its attendant socialities.



Fig. 5 “*Agit Kino iteration no.1*” Ethnographic Terminalia exhibition at Crane Arts Gallery in Philadelphia, PA, 2009.

Agit Kino in the 21st century: A contemporary traveling tent

The circuits of anthropological research and knowledge production had over time produced a keen sense of my own mobility in contrast to that of my Evenki interlocutors. I learned about pre-Soviet modes of travel and the supporting material culture (Shirokogoroff 1929) as well as the profound Soviet and post-Soviet transformations of the 20th Century (Anderson 2000, Sirina 2006). Through these momentous shifts the tent and Evenki ideals of portability have persisted as a part of everyday life. Even for those whose lives revolved around work in the cities and villages, the tent persists as both experience and symbol.

I began to think of my work writing about history and culture in Central Siberia in nomadic metaphors of movement, place, seasons, and cycles of return. The first part of Jouko Aaltonene's and Heimo Lappalainen's documentary trilogy *Taiga Nomads* is called *Hundreds of Homes* (1992). This aptly named film follows a family of reindeer herders through their seasonal round of activities in the last days of Soviet socialism. The tent is a major character in the film, as we watch it constructed and deconstructed from one camp to the next. It is carefully packed and loaded on to reindeer packs and sleighs. The social act of assembling the tent requires coordination and skill and the space it creates once it is assembled produces a home: shelter and warmth as well as objects and arrangements of profound familiarity. Another ethnographic film from China reinforces the sociality of nomadic architecture and offers a dramatic example of the tent's capacity to capture shadows projected by light on the tent-as-screen (Zhang 1959).

My own experience living in tents with the Evenki and Sakha people in central Siberia exposed me to a pace and tempo of life that I began to feel might be conducive to my own projects of description, storytelling, and theorizing. In the 1920s and 30s, the Bolsheviks brought their ideas about cultural enlightenment to project in the tent cinemas of Siberia, I thought it might be time to project Siberian ideas about culture and life in tent cinemas at sites across North America. Stripped of the entitlement, moral superiority, and hubris from the Soviet agit-prop campaigns, the tent could propose a more modest role in my own scholarship. I named the project "*Agit Kino*" after the theory I was then working out about the ways in which photography agitates against conventional historiography (Campbell 2014). The notion of agitation had become a powerful metaphor that referenced not only the revolutionary ideals of Communists and their work to uplift and transform life in Siberia, but also a theoretical project that could re-orient our approach to the documentary image. Just as Evenki could have glimpsed past the socialist propaganda to see moving pictures of everyday life in distant lands, I wanted the mobile cinema to allow viewers to be drawn into an affective appreciation for the sensuous particularity of lives in Siberia. While I have imagined many versions of this project, I have realized three iterations in three locations across the USA and Canada: Philadelphia, Saskatoon, and Austin.

“*Agit Kino*” Iteration no.1 was exhibited in 2009 at the Ethnographic Terminalia exhibition in the Crane Center for the Arts in Philadelphia. The large (12’ x 14’) canvas wall tent contained a handful of simple chairs and a hollowed-out white plinth within which was a digital projector that threw a looped sequence of three separate videos on to the back of the canvas wall. From the outside you could see into the tent, through its entrance – door flaps pulled back with ties. None of the videos playing inside had dialogue; rather they all featured ambient soundscapes mixed with diegetic audio elements from field recording: motors, water, reindeer walking through the taiga, the particular snapping of a campfire burning larch, and barely intelligible snippets of conversation. If you were peering through the entrance, you might also catch part of what was on the screen. From around the rear side of the tent, the entire back wall in its opacity captured the projection, too. At times people gathered on that side to watch, though the image was reversed and much less clear, it was still experienced and heard, and it amplified a core element of the project: the unique architectural experience of tent cinema.

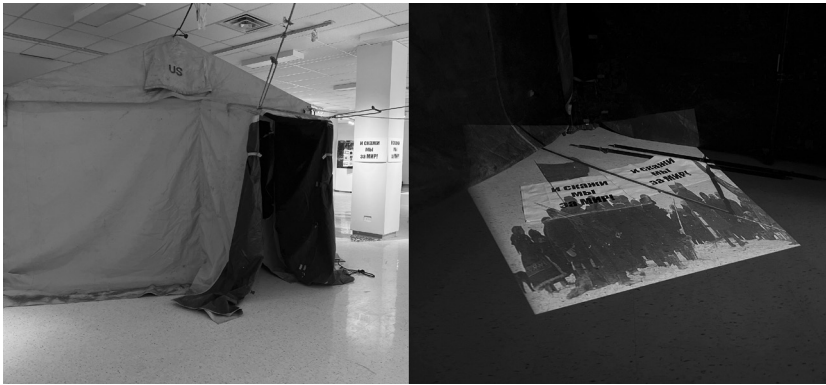


Fig. 6 “*Agit Kino* iteration no.2.” Gordon Snellgrove Gallery, University of Saskatchewan, 2022.

The set of videos cycled one after the other on repeat from morning until the sun set each day of the exhibition. Visitors walked by, caught by sounds, and gazed at the film projection from outside the tent in the dimly lit, cavernous gallery. From the right angle, near or afar they could glimpse into the tent to see chairs within and a projected image cast of the rear wall. At times the tent was full with an audience of six or more, watching quietly or chatting amongst themselves. Occasionally I paused the cycle and flow to host visitors and talk through a particular video. In this I began to learn the compelling particularity of the tent cinema. While the rest of the area was busy with visitors, the quiet and removed space of the cinema-within-the-gallery permitted new and unanticipated ways of engaging with an audience. I was surprised by the intimacy of the space and richness of the conversation it allowed for. It reminded me of living

in tents in Siberia where people came and went, conversations and rest intermingled. *Agit Kino* became, to some degree, a faint echo of the socialities made possible by early twentieth century tent cinema.

Agit Kino no.2: And Tell them We're for Peace

In 2022, looking back over a pandemic's worth of photographs I suggested to my friend Artem that I could include some of them in a slideshow as part of an art exhibition that I had been planning in Canada. I had come to the University of Saskatchewan to give a lecture, lead a series of workshops, and curate a gallery exhibition. The project was titled "Anxious documents of great precision: On the shared taskscapes of ethnography, documentary photography and contemporary art" and it resulted in an exhibition at the Gordon Snellgrove Gallery in Saskatoon. I proposed to Artem that we use his photographs as part of a gallery exhibition using the *Agit Kino* cinema-within-a-gallery. That installation (made with the help of the artist Jean Sebastien Gaultier) was an explicit reflection on ethnographic collaboration in a time of war. It juxtaposed scenes of early socialist construction in Siberia with scenes of Artem's everyday life, images that are almost exactly a hundred years later. The images were projected over a statement I had received from Artem when I asked him if there was anything beyond the photographs that he wanted to convey to the audience. "Tell them we're for peace" he said.

I remembered reading about the artist Nan Goldin's famous slideshow events in New York. Though Artem's photographs from Siberia bear no resemblance to hers – they capture a radically different place and pace of life – they share a commitment to the mattering of the ordinary and the everyday. Those from Artem were concerned with rural life, comradeship, and family. They document the life of a man in his late forties with a family and a job. They feature relationalities through extended family, celebrations, picnics by the river, and long fishing trips. Through them you get the sense of well-knit communities, rites-of-passage, and affective intensities of an ordinary world. Artem shared his photographs with me, at first in comradeship, a friendship buoyed by digital communication. These groups of images assembled and disassembled were no doubt shared with others too, in different configurations. A cousin would be sent some by text. Others were printed out and collaged together in a poster as a gift for an aunt's birthday. Some made it on to his adult daughter's phone and were shared within her own networks. Each re-assembly of photographs reproduced another sense of connection, another possible connotation. Overall, they produced visually mediated worlds of affective and social resonance that help to detail life in Evenkiia. To a small degree when others shared these same images, meaning shifted to accommodate a different audience but they were shared with me as a way of sustaining our friendship and illustrating Artem's love for nature, for life in the

boreal taiga. When we agreed to the exhibition, he continued to send pictures: sunsets and birthday parties, work travel and campfires. The beauty and bounty of “nature” is a densely packed expression in the context of Indigenous Russia, it is complexity exposed but left entangled by Artem in these images.

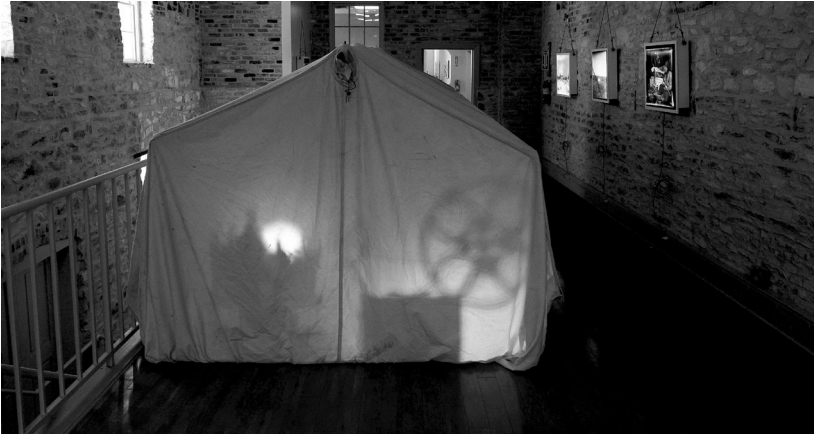


Fig. 7 “*Agit Kino* iteration no.3” at the Old Bakery and Emporium. Austin, Texas, 2023.

Agit-Kino no.3 at the Old Bakery and Emporium in Austin, Texas

The latest iteration of *Agit Kino* was part of an exhibition at a gallery in Austin, Texas. I developed this work for a dual exhibition, alongside the painter Ann Bobroff-Hajal, titled *Empire’s Echo*. The show ran from 1 June to 12 August 2023, and was titled *Agit Kino: Tell Them We Are For Peace*. I described as a work that “features historic photographs and a tent cinema inspired by the early 20th-century Agitprop tents used by itinerant Bolshevik projectionists to screen news, propaganda, and entertainment for nomadic peoples.” Over the summer hundreds of visitors passed through the gallery and encountered the tent in an entirely new configuration. There were two main components of this exhibition: on the walls surrounding the *Agit Kino* tent hung back-lit light panels displaying photographic transparencies from Siberian archives. Five large photographs depicted scenes of Indigenous life in the early 20th Century at the beginning of socialist cultural construction programs. Hung with thick red cord on brass knobs the light boxes mimicked Soviet formal ornamentation that was a standard of official socialist interior design in public buildings: the deep red of the communist flag and the golden icons of hammer, sickle, and star. The photographs were shot as glass plate negatives in the 1920s by Soviet photographers with the aim of depicting

the work of building socialism in the North.¹¹ I had chosen images that gave a sense of the interiority and exteriority of the canvas wall tents used by many nomadic families at the time.



Fig. 7 Anonymized images share by my collaborator Artem. Used as a slide show in the “*Agit Kino* iteration no.3” exhibition. Old Bakery and Emporium. Austin, Texas, 2023.

The tent itself played on the idea of Gorky’s kingdom of shadows. One end was set up as a diorama with a wood burning stove and a monitor playing a looped slideshow of anonymized photographs shared by Artem. Visitors couldn’t enter the tent, rather they sat outside of it on chairs to watch the slideshow. On the rear side of the tent was projected the silhouette of a film projector – the reels spinning and the motor grinding away against. Within the tent was a speaker playing parts of the soundtrack from the 1970 film, *Tymanchi’s Friend*. That film was a celebration of Evenki people

¹¹ The negatives were digitized under a project funded by the British Library for the Endangered Archives Programme (Anderson and Campbell 2009).

and soviet Evenkiia. Despite following the staid scripts of the socialist screen, it has been celebrated as a contribution to Indigenous cinema (Demians 2020). It offers not just Evenki actors playing themselves on screen but also speaking their own language. While visitors could not enter the tent, they could hear Evenki voices and boreal soundscapes resonant through the gallery.

Conclusion

The *Agit Kino* project revealed to me how I was moved by the histories of itinerant projectionists and self-reflective of my own professionalization as a Siberianist: I wanted to explore the conditions of representation under the terms of cross-cultural encounter. I reasoned at the time of the first exhibition, that the social conventions fostered in the gallery were compounded in the space of the cinema opening new relations and feelings. A tent installation creates a bifurcated public, including those on the inside and those on the outside. The circulation of these positions could develop an embodied looking that is only possible with installation work. *Agit Kino* borrowed tent technology in search of a different embodied knowing, in search of a possibility of telling stories from the North alongside well-researched histories and testimonies. The limit of the gallery, particularly in its configuration for a multi-artist exhibition was to create an exclusive space and experience. Exclusion of sound (never complete) and vision (never total) was the goal.

When I asked Artem as a collaborator how he wanted to address the audience he replied in words and images. What is beauty of place? How do we utter those words without letting them get captured by a phatic expression of sentiment. What does it mean to love, to really love a place? The *Agit Kino* tent cinema allowed me to complete some aspects of my ethnographic work from afar, but in a different register. The research questions have shifted but the audiences still come with questions about life in Siberia, eager to learn about Russia, nomads, shamans, Gulags, reindeer, cold, and other terms associated with the Russian North.

I packed up the last version of *Agit Kino* in August of 2023. The tent is rolled up in my attic. The quantity of images shared between Artem and me have slowed as a new pace and relationality has taken over. The forceful schedules of immediate life have gradually eclipsed those less immediate connections. Even my own planning has diminished in the face of an interminable conflict. I have always struggled to hold these distant places and relations up in the bustle of professional academic life. For the time being the tent project is on hold, as is my ethnographic research in Siberia. I have absolutely no sense of when things might change or if, when they do and it once again becomes to travel to Siberia, I will go back to pick up abandoned projects, to make new ones, or just to visit old friends.

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Figures

- 1 *Agit Kino*, iteration no.3. Old Bakery and Emporium Gallery in Austin, Texas, 2023.
- 2 Silhouettes in front of a partially deconstructed tent. Outtakes from *The Ewenki on the Banks of the Argun River*, Zhang 1959.
- 3 Outtakes from *Hundreds of Homes*. Aaltonen and Lappalainen, 1992, 1959.
- 4 Archival photograph courtesy of Krasnoyarsk Krai Regional Museum. Item no. kkkm_052-011. Date: Unknown; Photographer: Unknown; Archivist's description: "A tent, a skeleton of a teepee, a sled with a load and a native with a dog in the tundra."
- 5 *Agit Kino* iteration no.1. Ethnographic Terminalia exhibition at Crane Arts Gallery in Philadelphia, PA, 2009.
- 6 *Agit Kino* iteration no.2. Gordon Snellgrove Gallery, University of Saskatchewan, 2022.
- 7 *Agit Kino* iteration no.3 at the Old Bakery and Emporium. Austin, Texas, 2023.
- 8 Anonymized images share by my collaborator Artem. Used as a slide show in the "*Agit Kino* iteration no.3" exhibition. Old Bakery and Emporium. Austin, Texas, 2023.