

From Peterhof Station to Crescenzago:

Agit-Trains and *Griffer's Code*

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We pixelate your face as a bag is passed down to you. The red from the rear lights of a passing train are reflected in the shiny side of a stationery car in the lay-ups. I lick my lips then place tall tins of chrome paint into boxes, carefully cracking a door to let the sunlight in. Piero is still calling the look-out on his iPhone, not a burner. Through the park, we climb concrete picket fences and from here, the video whirls between locations: a train shed with red and white stock in the daytime, still no painting but lots of crouching, discussion, makeshift weapons, hand gestures, then crossing a six-lane highway against the traffic, Jim's red New Balance shoes with the green soles nearly get stuck on the crash barriers.

Boris punctures a can of mint green with some medical scissors and the paint flies out in a traumatic instant, like a final breath or precious oxygen leaving the airlock of a spacecraft. Finally, we are painting. Utah outlines the left side of her 'A' in white and we quickly glimpse Jim's work. Piero's already finished a garish mess and is taking pictures, then we are climbing out and waiting at Crescenzago for the running pics, but there's no time.

Under a white sky, between grey fence and grey train, Utah is wielding a long 750ml silver can like a wand or prosthetic, small arm movements making giant rough letters the height of the carriage. A round-faced man in a black Adidas top waves from inside the train, while Boris jokes in bad Italian with a passerby on a bicycle who in America might be a cop but here is just a bemused and sanguine local. The video finishes with a montage of running shots in subways, grassy embankments, more cans in boxes, trapdoors, tunnels and a whole train, aping the lyrics of the video's title song... "Going Wild for the Night... Fuck Being Polite." Now reverse the footage and show the painting flying off the train back into the can.

More ladders, more scampering over the roofs of red trains in a giant shed, bouncing on power lines like circus slack lines. The Ether panel in this section is especially beautiful, the way the E, as flipped 3, flows into the curved cross-piece of the T. Quick throw-ups, the guard snaps a picture of us, city walking, liquid paper pens on red fire equipment, mops over stickers

on street boxes, Boris' "conquest of spaces" slogan, blue on red and then a final barrage of panels running in subways through an oblivious public, ending with the train doors closing on the final beat of the music.

In a hundred years from now, or less, they'll be no jay-pee-gees or em-pee-threes. In this future, they'll be no more videos from the 2010s, or the files will only be available in certain closed apps or be corrupted by bots or they'll be so many videos that no one will know or remember why *Griffer's Code 5: Fuck Being Polite* was so important. *Griffer's Code 5* is part of a series of web videos about graffiti made by a Bulgarian graffiti writer and impresario known as Good Guy Boris. Beginning in 2012 and shot in a number of European cities, the videos captured some of the most creative active graffiti writers and set a new standard in the performance of graffiti.

In this piece, I imagine a past history for the connection between train painting and the moving image in Europe as presented by *Griffer's Code 5*. I also anticipate an imagined future where the films, or at least their original context, is washed away. To do this, I combine a detailed transcription of the scenes from the *Griffer's Code 5* video with a journey to some other stations, one hundred years ago. While Good Guy Boris, the American train painters Danielle "Utah" Bremner and Jim "Ether" Harper, and their new friends Giovanni and Piero wait at Crescenzago Station in Milan to take photographs of their freshly painted train panels, there is action at another station, at Peterhof, outside St. Petersburg. Ironically, the clue to their connection lies in the very first frame of *Griffer's Code 5*, a white screen showing the Griffers logo that Boris has created.

Before there is any sound or action, *Griffer's Code 5* displays an image of double-headed eagle. A symbol of Empire and the Orthodox church, the motif also appears in many Eastern European contexts, including the coat of arms of the Bulgarian Tsar Ivan Alexander from the fourteenth century. At the recent football World Cup, two Swiss players aroused controversy by making the symbol of the double-headed eagle in goal celebrations, supposedly in reference to their ethnic

Albanian heritage. The press reported: "Both players put their open hands together with their thumbs locked and fingers outstretched to make what looks like the double-headed eagle displayed on Albania's flag. The thumbs represent the heads of the two eagles, while the fingers look like the feathers."

Not really one for vexillology or heraldry, Boris had adopted the symbol from a local sporting club in Sofia but it also symbolised for him a connection not just to Bulgaria but to the whole Near East region that stretched from the Caucasus to the Anatolia and down towards Canaan and Mesopotamia. Boris also loved the nineteenth double-headed eagle, the coat of arms of the Russian Empire from 1883 until the Revolution. But to the modern eye, the two black birds look exhausted rather than regal, gasping for breath and weighed down with their individual diamond crowns. The most Imperial gesture of this coat of arms was the fist that grasped a golden sceptre with its own miniature two-headed eagle. With its opposable thumb and broad knuckles the eagle's fist looks almost human.

The two eagles are draped with a golden chain of jewels that included five other miniature double eagles. The tongues of the eagles on the Russian Imperium were meant to billow like flags but instead they sag like a choking, gagging tyrant. This gaudy display of wealth now looks desperate: the 1917 Revolution would sweep away this absurd display of power but then inaugurate its opposite. Boris would grow up in a bleak, flat, whitewashed world of communist cronyism. It is almost too obvious to state: train graffiti was ancient heraldry reborn, the return of the gaudy symbols of family and personal empires, repressed by communism. The decadent painted carriages would be like the once-royal cars that the aristocrats partied in across the 1880s, before the crash.

The five of us walk quickly across the intersection near Cairolì Castello. It is not warm and the early morning rain has left the roads shiny. Ignoring the zebra crossing, we walk diagonally across the roads but there is little traffic as Milan is slow to wake up.

There are tourists waiting outside the coffee shops, some sheltering under the awnings, another with an enormous blue umbrella. An American in pale jeans has slung her jumper around her waist as she talks on her mobile phone. The city trees glisten and the rain that drips from their leaves has pooled around three concrete bollards, designed to prevent vehicles from entering the precinct, prefiguring the vehicle attacks that will strike Las Ramblas, the Promenade des Anglais and London Bridge in a few years.

We are all loaded down with backpacks and the loose cords from mine slap gentle against my brown corduroy jacket as I walk. As usual the choice of clothing is a mixture of video styling and utility. We will need to look like writers on camera but be able to blend

easily into the morning commuters. Strictly active sports wear mixed with ex-army, Nikes on our feet and plenty of face wear, caps, beanies, bandanas, hoods and glasses. We'll also likely be climbing fences and crawling in tunnels, certainly lying in the dirt and in the event of a chase: anything can happen. We are ready for wet and dry, hot and cold, day and night.

We walk in unison and everyone's eyes are on the station entrance, but we walk straight past, ignoring the carabinieri smoking. The Italians lead us to the parkland and we prepare for the entry. Utah puts on a black bandana that Boris has given her, printed with the insignia of his website, a double-headed eagle with a short sword in one claw and a jewelled crown in the other, while a larger black crown floats above. As he pulls on his own bandana, dressing for the part in Boris' play, Jim thought, this is me and Utah, a pair of conjoined bald eagles, two birds in flight. The sceptre in our claws is pair of bolt cutters and the orb is a spray can.

In the days after the February Revolution, the Provisional Government impounded Tsar Nicholas II's train at Peterhof, outside Petrograd. Sometimes referred to as the Russian Versailles, the Palace at Peterhof was constructed by Peter the Great and often used by Tsar and his family. The first railway line in Russia was a single track connecting the Imperial Palace at St Petersburg to a summer residence.

Stabled at Peterhof Station, Tsar Nicholas II's train was the picture of luxury, painted outside in a deep blue with gold double-eagle insignia. Its carriage interiors were decorated in dark panelled woods with ormolu chandeliers and silk walls hangings. The carriages contained bedrooms, a kitchen and servant's quarters, a dining room and chapel. Writing about images of the impounded train at Peterhof station in *Red Star Over Russia*, the pre-eminent Western collector of Soviet visual culture David King wrote: "By contrast, Peterhof station was decorated with a supremacist influenced artwork incorporating a double-headed eagle tumbling to the ground. The slogan reads: *The Imperialist War and the Collapse of the Autocracy.*"

Even before the crime had taken place, the train yard was lit up like a crime scene. You can see my vintage watch with its silver band and clasp rubbing against a bracelet of white plastic stones and the varsity patch on my grey jacket, a strong serif M outlined in white, as I assembled three good stones from the ballast on the train tracks, placing them carefully on the concrete base of the steel overhead lines.

From behind, we can also see Danielle shifting her hair from her face, she also has a varsity patch, the letter C on the rear of her blue beanie, black nail polish and an ex-military jacket, from the German army reserve. We remember to blur Piero's face in this shot. Thereafter he is wearing a black bandana with a white face drawn on the front, but it is hard to make out. As well as

bandanas, now everyone is wearing gloves, but Boris is struggling to operate the controls on his Canon camera, and so removes the glove on his left hand.

We've cut the fence, and our third friend is pointing through the hole, his camouflage jacket makes sense against the long grass that grows around the edge of the tracks, where the workers can only access to cut it once or twice a season. The sun is still low in the sky. Jump to another mission where our contact is on a white iPhone, while we wait in our black North Face jackets. We would never take phones to a yard but here we are just getting an update on the yard situation and the security patterns. Are we right to go?

A guy climbs over a solid metal fence in a woodland, the sky almost blotted out by green leaves and where his black gloves touch the top of the fence there's a foot-high MOSES tag. In black gloves, Piero shrugs in front of a plain security fence as a train passes, the temporary kind, with no razor wire, electric charges or sensors, just a plain old fence that we can walk through almost without breaking stride. Shouldn't the train be stopping here? Isn't there a driver changeover, a timetable lag, a disabled passenger, a cigarette break? This should be our time, but I've got my feet crossed waiting and Danielle is rolling her own cigarette.

But then we are in, we've cut the fence, Danielle climbs ahead of me. The cans are in a box inside a cotton grocery bag from Carrefour. Now it's nearly midday and inside the station, where trains are waiting for the afternoon peak, we climb through between the carriages of the stationary train, stepping on the black coupling. Double back, we are in the park from the start and are lifting up the grates to the ventilation tunnels below, it takes two of us.

Outside another yard, Piero lies prone on the concrete, craning to see under a set of metal gates, the toes of his battered Nikes are pushing down into the dirt, his abs are straining and he's still has most of his head wrapped in a cotton bandana. As he looks and listens, a line of grass is pushing up through the concrete and the signs of renovation, a surveyor's yellow peg and a stack of temporary fencing, offer only basic cover. Now the sun is overhead.

Next he fingers the paint covered latch of the train workshops and we are inside, crouching, Danielle is peeling the lens cap off her Sony and Boris points his Canon at me, I've shed my jacket in the park, there's product placement galore, not just the bandanas but I'm wearing a Griffers T-shirt, with Boris' letters spelling "My Only Weakness is a List of Crimes."

Quick night shot, it's so dark the auto ISO on the camera has risen above 3200 so the sky is super pixelated, a mumble of blues mixed with pink and green streaks, Cyan and Magenta, not how the sky really looked at all, but the three figures, two with hoods, sitting atop the fence are all under-exposed. Now a

strange shot, one of us grasping the ankle of another guiding their foot into an invisible toe-hold in the security fence, a gesture reminiscent of adolescence, when you can't physically carry the weight of a friend but can offer only reassurance.

Now the whole scene becomes more cinematic, building to the most extraordinary moment. First, the focus on the Canon goes haywire, stuck on the clean subway train in the underground siding, stuck on its yellow livery and the distant lights but Giovanni has turned back to Boris and he is pointing, the three of us – Giovanni, Danielle and me – have slid out of focus, we're like pasty figures on a green screen, dropped into the background. As the MC rhymes "tasers" with "lasers", Giovanni is gesturing to Boris to be quiet. I put my hand out to indicate we should pause in the tunnel and watch Piero scout ahead on the left. There's no third rail. The tracks aren't live. It's Europe, not America.

Where the impulse of the February Bourgeois Revolution was to impound the Tsar's train, when the Bolsheviks came to power in October they set out a radical program of putting the countries rolling stock in the service of the Revolution. A year before Lenin would issue a decree nationalising the film industry and handing control of all film production to the People's Commissariat of Education, or Narkompros, the first Bolshevik whole train, named after Lenin himself, pulled out of the station on August 13, 1918. These so-called Agit-trains were painted with colourful graphic images, including the names of the trains, such as "Red East", "Soviet Caucasus" and "Red Cossack."

The first Agit-train departs less than a year after the Bolsheviks had gained power and at a moment when the Revolution was still under threat on many fronts from the White Russian and counter-revolutionary forces. Specially built armoured trains were instrumental in the early fighting and Lenin has sent Stalin to Baku to apply terror tactics to prevent attacks on trains moving through the Northern Caucasus. Perversely like the rapid appearance of home satellite dishes on the roofs of Chinese cities in the 1990s, the expansion of the Russian train network under the Tsar laid the seeds of Revolution, showing the peasants who travelled to the cities for the first time that the Tsar was no God: just a man.

Painted outside with bright murals, the first Agit-train housed actors, a printing press and a film crew. Later Agit-trains would include a film production house, with a laboratory and editing suites. Painters sized up the train carriages the same way that graffiti writers would do in New York 50 years later. On the exterior of one carriage, a top-to-bottom figure unfolds a cinema screen while at his feet the now familiar silhouette of film canisters, though with the archaic three holes rather than the American six-holed reels.

The experience of train travel, where trains unspooled across the tracks and the carriages were edited together, linked and montaged like frames of a film, was a powerful experience for a generation of Soviet directors. On the first Agit-train was Edward Tissé, a military cameraman who would become one of the most important camera operators in Soviet cinema. In 1925, Tissé would work with Sergei Eisenstein, shooting landmark films such as *Strike* and *Battleship Potemkin*.

Lev Kuleshov and Dziga Vertov also travelled across Russia on the early Agit-trains. Born Denis Kaufman, is it said that Vertov chose his new name to reflect the clicking sounds of movie cameras, but his name could equally be an echo of the sonic patterns of train travel. When the first Agit-train departed, Vertov was 22 years old. The experience of shooting film in documentary and battle conditions, rather than in the studio, would mark much of post-revolutionary Soviet cinema. For Eisenstein, the pinnacle of cinema was the collision of meaning created by conflict: montage as train crash.

So, for those in the future, to be clear: *Grifter's Code 5* was a slickly edited video of graffiti writers in Milan made in 2013, continuing the tradition of train painting that came to prominence in New York in the 1970s,

but it has other roots in the events of the Russian Revolution one hundred years earlier, when the Bolsheviks seized the Russian train network, including the Tsar's personal train and pressed the rolling stock into service for the Revolution, a gesture that is little known today but had far-reaching implications for a generation of Soviet film-makers, who would pioneer the cinematic language that would make the pounding disjunctures of *Grifter's Code* possible.

Among the many threads that link these stories is the connection between the experience of train travel and cinema but also the motif of the two-headed eagle, a symbol of Empire, already present at Peterhof station when the Tsar's train was reclaimed for the people, and inserted by Good Guy Boris in the opening frame of *Grifter's Code 5*.

The centenary of the Agit-trains reminds us of the train on which we are all now travelling: one wooden deep blue carriage from the Tsar's personal train joined to a brightly painted Bolshevik carriage loaded with film equipment joined to a classic New York whole car (Dondi, Seen, Blade) joined to Boris' personal carriage, painted top-to-bottom in chrome, with his own Manifesto, ready to become the soundtrack of his own propaganda film... *Fuck Being Polite*.

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