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THE VERTOV DILEMMA:  
Film-Eye vs. Film-Truth



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In the best of Vertov's works, even in particular sequences, one encounters an unusual visual/auditory dynamism and a strong sense of actuality, both stemming from the filmmaker's artistic and political being: on the one hand, it reflects an artist's instinctive drive to present the reality in a manner unique to the medium, and on the other, it reveals the conscious tendency of a devoted Communist to utilize the film as a means of communication. From these two attitudes emerged Vertov's creative method known as "Film-Eye" (kinoglaz) and his shooting principle which he named "Film-Truth" (kinopravda).

To Vertov—as well as to Godard—motion pictures have meant "truth captured twenty-four frames per second"; but, to become Cinema (with a capital "C" as Vertov often used to write it) the shots should be structured in the way that helps the viewers perceive more than they could see with the naked eye. Vertov was fully aware of these two aspects antithetical—yet essential— aspects of the medium, and tried to accommodate them in his films, while at the same time discussing them in his essays. His main concern was how to convey what he called the "author-director's" personal vision of reality through images and sounds that represent "life as it is" (zhizn' kaka ona est') Such a practical/theoretical dilemma was (and still is) complex and daring, especially for the artist working in a country whose government considered the superiority of aesthetics over ideology in art a crime. Within such working conditions it was nearly impossible for Vertov to undertake a substantial analytical exploration of his theoretical views, including the most challenging "Theory of Intervals" (teoriia intervalov).

In Vertov's writings, the idea of "intervals" is explicated as an instructional suggestion pertinent to montage, rather than as an elaborate theoretical discourse spelled out in the manner of Eisenstein. However simplified, "theory of intervals" focuses on the important (graphic and rhythmic) correlation among the shot scales, shooting angles, the movement within the frame, the interaction between light and darkness (both within and between adjacent shots), and the speed of the camera/projector (providing an illusion of the fast or slow motion on the screen).<sup>1</sup>

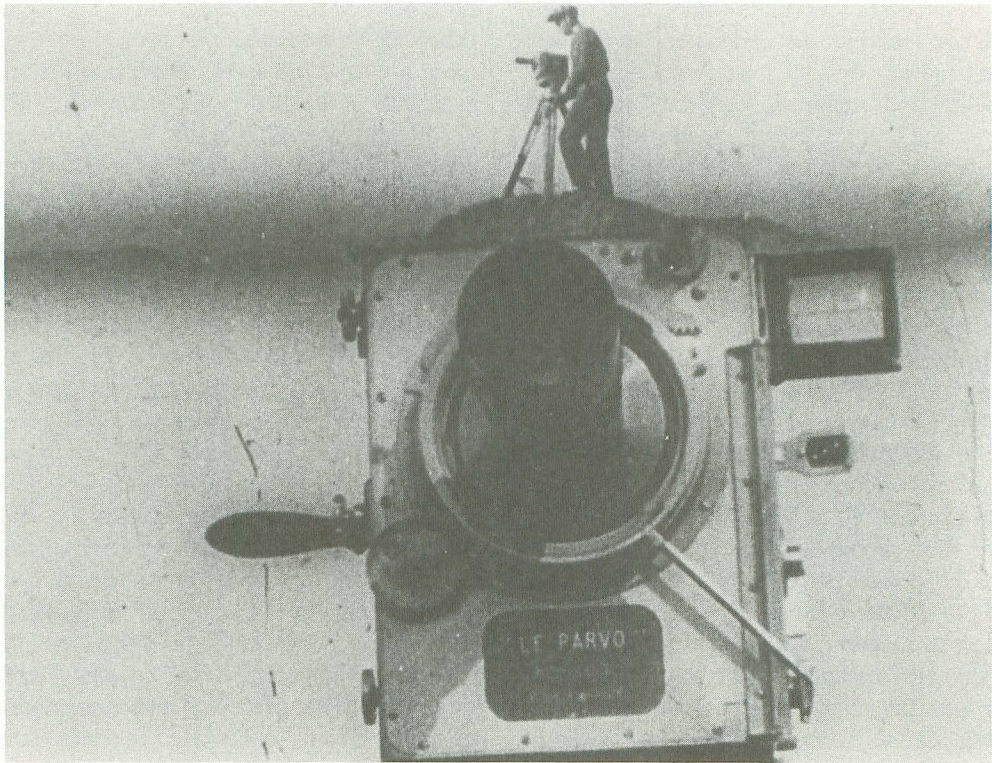
Each of these formal features is of vital significance for the kinesthetic impact of a montage piece, and as such deserves serious consideration, especially in the theory of a documentary film.

No one would argue that Vertov's writings are as sophisticated and erudite as Eisenstein's, nor do they possess the precision by which Kuleshov and Pudovkin scrutinize the technological and structural aspects of the medium. Preoccupied with the day-to-day instructions of his "kinoks" (kinoki), Vertov had neither time nor the necessity to write extensively about his method. Unlike Eisenstein who generally devised his theoretical concepts prior to their realization, Vertov formulated his concepts after practical experience. Consequently, Vertov's understanding (here the term "appreciation" would fit nicely) of the medium can be seen as a *poetics of cinema*, firmly associated with the filmmakers' "praxis" in both an ideological and a theoretical sense. With this in mind, his essays should be studied in conjunction with a close analysis of his work; only through a comparative examination of Vertov's films and essays can contemporary theorists understand why Vertov so vehemently insisted on the difference between "unstaged" and "staged" films. Long before Roland Barthes asserted the significance of what he called "That-has-been" and "authentication of the referent,"<sup>2</sup> Vertov advised his "kinoks" to "capture life unawares" (zhizn' v rasplokh), i.e. to preserve the ontological authenticity of the motion picture image, as one of the crucial phenomenological properties of the medium.

There are numerous sequences in Vertov's films where the shots are juxtaposed on "intervals," producing a kinesthetic impact rarely found in the history of cinema. In my book, *Constructivism in Film: The Man With the Movie Camera*, I analyzed several such sequences (among them, "Street and Eye," "Working Hand," "Awakening," "Cameraman and machines"), without any pretension to expand Vertov's hypothesis into an elaborate theoretical argument.<sup>3</sup> My analysis was aimed at demonstrating how Vertov embodied his thinking about the medium in a practice that is not at all "hypothetical."

It has been acknowledged that Vertov pos-





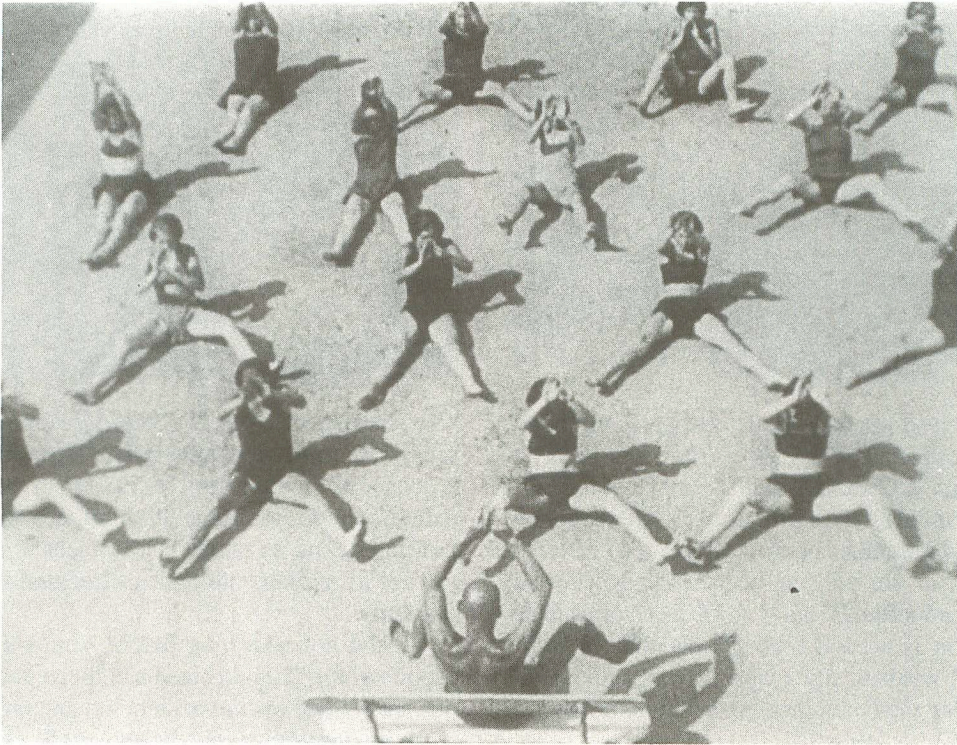
sessed an inborn feeling for the kinesthetic dynamism capable of affecting the film viewer in a (sensorial) way no other medium can match. Few of the Soviet filmmakers exhibited such a keen sensitivity for genuine cinematic expression as Vertov, who believed that the human eye, "armed" with the camera (and microphone), can penetrate beneath the physical appearance of reality. He claimed that such a "new vision of reality" can be accomplished by "the kinesthetic resolution" (kineticheskoe razreshenie) of the montage piece, through the "art of organizing various movements of objects *in space* [italics added], to provide the viewer with a cinematic experience of the world (kinooschchushchenie mira)."<sup>4</sup> Note Vertov's use of the term art (without quotation marks, and in relation to the montage organization), in contrast to his use of the word "art" (with quotation marks) whenever referring to "staged" films. As we know, he vehemently criticized Eisenstein's films because they "staged" not only the dramatic situations, but also the historic personalities.

According to Vertov, the "film-thing" (as he

referred to the movies), should be obtained by cinematic means (not theatrical or literary), "without lowering the *artistic level* [italics added]."<sup>5</sup>

Obviously, by the "artistic level" he meant the aesthetic rendition through the expressive means specific to the medium. Symptomatically, through Vertov's writings, the term "art" (iskusstvo) and "construction" (konstruktsiia) appear in essays related to "Film-Eye," whereas the term "life-fact," (zhiznenyi fakt) and "life caught unawares" (zhizn vrasplokh) are consistently employed in the essays dealing with "Film-Truth." In so doing, Vertov emphasized the dialectical contradiction between the camera's phenomenological link with the world as it appears in reality and the creator's natural inclination to transcend it through an aesthetic reconstruction. If intervals are (a) instrumental to obtain "inner truth about things" and (b) indispensable for achieving a "concentrated way of seeing," then they must be essential to the structures representing both "Film-Truth" and



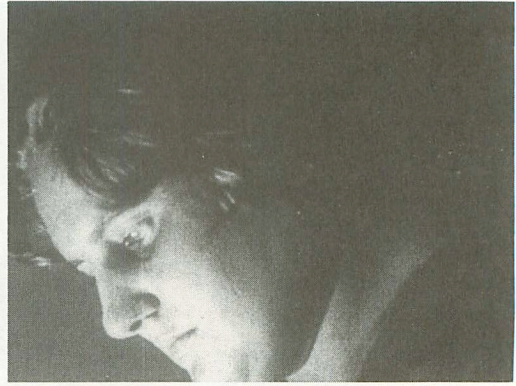


“Film-Eye.” The difference is in their functions: “Film-Truth,” constructed by “Film-Eye,” is the ultimate goal of an “artist-director,” which implies that such a truth does not mean “mechanically recorded facts but truth structured by montage and through intervals.”<sup>6</sup> There exists a complex structural liaison between truth and intervals. Through their phenomenological and aesthetic interaction they contribute to the transposition of visual and auditory data into a more powerful, more penetrating, and more revealing vision of reality, which Vertov considered to be the Cinematic Truth, recorded by the cinematographic apparatus, and structured according to the filmmakers theoretical concept of the medium.

Vertov believed that the power of “intervals” not only affects the viewers perception, but also “shatters” his/ her customary way of perceiving reality : the “optical explosion” resulting from the “montage battle” occurring between the adjacent shots helps the viewer penetrate beneath the ordinary appearance of the referent. After

experiencing the optical dynamism of Vertov’s most elaborately kinesthetic sequences, it becomes clear why he considered them essential for conveying the “author-director’s” truth, i.e., his own attitude toward what he called the “life-fact.” Vertov argued that, because of the kinesthetic impact they release, “intervals” are intrinsically linked by the “Film-Eye” method whose ultimate goal is to transcend the recorded fact, turning it into an *aesthetic* structure. I emphasize the word aesthetic because it is exactly what Vertov had in mind while writing about the “creative use of intervals.” He and his “kinoks” realized the power of “intervals” affects the photographed referent with a paradoxical outcome: the more emphasis on “intervals,” the greater distortion of the representational aspect of the image projected on the screen. Paradoxical as it is, such dialectical nature of the montage structure is the crux of Vertov’s theoretical dilemma: how to reconcile truth as captured by the camera with truth grasped by a “montage way of seeing” (*montazhnoe vizhu*)? This dilemma, in





turn raised other questions essential to the theory of documentary (“unstaged”) film, such as “What is Truth in Cinema?” and “Should ‘Film-Truth’ accommodate the filmmaker’s subjective view of and comment upon the recorded referent/event, or are they mutually excluded?” And, most importantly, how much directorial intervention is needed (enough) to make a ‘film-thing’ aesthetically plausible yet without destroying the ontological authenticity of the motion picture image?”

While the answer to these questions is only indicated in Vertov’s essays, his masterpiece *The Man With the Movie Camera* suggests a possibility of the practical solution. by relating Vertov’s theoretical hypotheses to a close analysis of this film, it would be possible to lay ground for a (still non-existent!) general theory of the documentary mode, at least one aiming at transcending the strict observational style of journalistic newsreels. Torn by his ideological/aesthetic dilemma, intensively dedicated to the

“Kinoks Factory” Vertov allowed his cinematic sensitivity to act spontaneously. Hence in one sequence he would permit his camera to capture reality with no, or little editorial/directorial intervention, and in another he subjected select footage to an elaborate optical/structural transformation.

It did not take long before Vertov’s perception of the Truth in cinema collided with the official attitude toward truth in life and art. The party ideologists (Zhdanov above all) looked upon the truth as “ a dialectically mutable matter,” constantly swaying within the vicissitude of the given socio-historical circumstances, absolutely dependent on the role truth plays in the revolutionary process. Since the party was the sole arbiter in all matters concerning society and individuals, only one correct “truth” was to be conveyed in all forms of artistic expression. Any personal appreciation, inner vision or poetic expression had to be sacrificed for political needs. The only way, therefore, to express a different



Images of Women from *The Man with the Movie Camera*





point of view was to make it ambiguous and metaphoric in a poetic sense. One can imagine how Vertov—with his sincere revolutionary zeal—felt while confronting such an authoritarian requirement. Lacking an ability (mastered by many Soviet artists) to manipulate his beliefs and ideas, Vertov arrived at the impasse that threatened his career.

From the beginning of Soviet Cinema, when the revolution seemed to be the best and only way of “building” an “ideal society,” Vertov disregarded the commissar’s frequent interference with the policy of the “Kinoks Factory.” As the pressure mounted, however, he had no other option but to smuggle in his films a few carefully designed (mostly climactic) sequences that testify to his disagreement with the current socio-political situation in the USSR (e.g., the shots of starving peasant children eating garbage during the great famine; the barefoot servant woman carrying a heavy suitcase belonging to her mistresses; the existence of prostitutes on Moscow

streets). Such an attitude, inevitably created problems for Vertov, and when *The Man with a Movie Camera* appeared on the screen, the official critics tried to disqualify it as “eccentric, confused, aimless and self-confused trickery.”<sup>7</sup> This was the appraisal by the establishment’s most esteemed film historian Nikolai Lebedev, who did not retract it to the end of his life, Lebedev was not alone—at home or abroad—in pronouncing Vertov’s film “a hodgepodge, unworthy of critical consideration,” the overall intention was to trivialize Vertov’s method.<sup>8</sup> Even Jay Leyda (Eisenstein’s student) admitted that he was “too stunned to sit through it again,” during the film’s New York opening in 1930. In the 1960 version of his *KINO-A History of the Russian Soviet Film*, Leyda wrote that “it was such a dazzling experiment that it took two or three other Soviet films with *normal* [italics added] stories to convince me that all Soviet films were not compounded of such intricate camera pyrotechnics.”<sup>9</sup> It seems strange that





Leyda failed to recognize in Vertov's film anything but an exercise produced by the portable camera, as his conclusion reveals: "the apparent purpose of the film was to show the breadth and precision of the camera's recording ability."<sup>10</sup> Later, especially in his lectures, Leyda reversed his judgement about the purpose of Vertov's masterpiece, yet without ever truly appreciating the scope of Vertov's achievement, he still saw merely "intricate camera pyrotechnics."

A formal examination of *The Man with the Movie Camera* reveals that, in art, one's subjective truth about reality should be considered credible to no lesser a degree than so-called objective truth. Vertov's truth about the Soviet city is a personal truth based on the "author-director's" perception of the outside world. Such a truth, of course, was seen as hostile to the concept of the truth based on the teaching of socialist realism. Vertov's next project further aggravated his situation, because it dealt with the most sacred icon of the Bolshevik revolution: Lenin. In his 1934 essay, Vertov explained that *Three Songs About Lenin* (1934) was built on "a complex interaction among various movements, in a spiral way, sometimes by sound, sometimes by the means of intertitles, sometimes without music and words [through facial expressions], and sometimes through the movement within the shot."<sup>11</sup> Obviously, Vertov's intention was to apply his "Theory of Intervals" to both image and sound (music, noises, voices) and create a poetic vision of Lenin, inspired by the people's memory, all of which is antithetical to the common practice of dramatizing the "life and work" of the communist leaders, as glorified by the Soviet filmmakers. In contrast, Vertov wanted to show "the Truth [about Lenin] in which the construction of the film was left open and visible, in the Meyerhold Style,"<sup>12</sup> which points to the self-referential structure of his film. In his essay "About the Love for a Real Person," Vertov described *Three Songs About Lenin* as an attempt to make an "unstaged poetic-documentary film" (dokumental' no-poeticheskii neinstsenirovannii fil'm),<sup>13</sup> aimed at hailing the "leader of the oppressed people" by showing the ordinary working citizens—not the establishment—express-

ing their love for the "liberator of the world proletariat" (as he is called in the introductory title of the film).

It was during the shooting and public showing of *Three Songs About Lenin* that Vertov experienced the most troubling effect of his ideological/aesthetic dilemma. In his diaries he expressed an anger when it became evident that the officials tried to decrease the public exposure of the film. It may seem paradoxical that the party was dissatisfied with a film so enthusiastically praising the first communist leader. The actual reason, however, was in the kind of "Leninist Image" Vertov presented on the screen, departing from the established practice of making political films. From today's political perspective, *Three Songs About Lenin* gains in its ideological significance, particularly when related to the recent decline of Bolshevism in the USSR.

As his diaries confirm, Vertov was fascinated with Mayakovsky's "ode" to Lenin and he tried to "match" Mayakovsky's literary poetic vision into cinematic poetic terms. Mayakovsky's laudatory style is evident both in the montage rhythm and in the function of the intertitles which reflect the filmmaker's personal attitude toward history. Above all, a particular intertitle (which appears near the end of the film) "If Lenin could only see our country now!" reverberates with contemporary overtones, both nostalgic and ironic. While preparing for a symposium on Vertov in Moscow, I have been engaged in analyzing *Three Songs About Lenin*, at the Harvard Film Archive. It was in the late afternoon (Wednesday, August 21, 1991) when I suddenly heard the cheers of a group of students who watched—on a TV monitor—Mikhail Gorbachev as he returned from custody in the Crimea, after the failure of military coup in Moscow. At that very moment, the final repetition of the intertitle ("If Lenin could only see our country now!") appeared on my Steenbeck! Turning to the TV set, I saw the images aired directly from Moscow while the intertitle continued to flash in my mind.

Other intertitles represent quotations from ideological slogans, popular songs, political proclamations, and party phraseology, all of them treated by Vertov as "life-facts" of their own



unique kind (literary, ritualistic, political). Their verbal structure truthfully represents the presumptuous grandeloquence—pompous yet empty—inherent to the totalitarian manipulation of the people. The intertitles' position within the film's montage structure generates an emotional impact by reminding the viewer of the early revolutionary times, untainted by Stalinist dogma. On the other hand, the documentary footage (taken from Vertov's own newsreels, state archives, or captured on location) have a cognitive signification by informing the viewer about the specific "life-facts" in the USSR.

Being highly personal, Vertov's vision of Lenin could not comply with the prescribed formula of producing films about Soviet dignitaries. In the narrative ("staged") mode, this practice was reduced to a histrionic impersonalization of the political figures; in the documentary ("unstaged") mode, the select footage would be arranged in a manner that fits the establishment's attitude toward the historical events and personalities, Vertov rejected such a

practice, opting instead for a metaphoric presentation of the "life-facts" based on his poetic sensitivity. No wonder such a subjective view of history failed to satisfy the cultural commissars who insisted on a dramatized and linear arrangement of the shots, with Lenin as the "protagonist." These quasi-documentary films (similar to modern docu-dramas), in which specially trained actors impersonate particular historical figures (most often Lenin and Stalin), constitute a great part of the Soviet filmography.

The montage structure, the composition of shots, the function of intertitles, the use of the sound, the choice of non-professional actors (typage) in *Three Songs About Lenin* sustain Vertov's poetic approach to the subject. The heroic pathos common to the Soviet documentary practice is replaced here by a gentle view of the ordinary, mostly ethnic people, with an emphasis on the female faces. Their expressions generate a poetic mood that permeates the entire film. A simple count reveals that *Three Songs About Lenin* contains nearly three times as many





close-ups of young women as of men. The film's climax, as Vertov indicates, coincides with a series of close-ups showing a young woman looking directly into the camera, while delivering an energetic soliloquy about their achievements in the cement factory. There is another young woman's face which is graphically foregrounded: shown in close-ups juxtaposed to various events throughout the film, this young woman with dark hair is the only person in the film that responds to the action by her gaze. Diegetically, she is experienced by the viewer on an emotional level, in accordance with Vertov's own attitude toward the photographed events and referents. Hence, it is not an exaggeration to claim that *Three Songs About Lenin* is imbued with a *feminine* (not feminist) sensibility, which contradicted the traditional "masculine" attitude of the Bolshevik mindset. Other Vertov films, including *The Man with the Movie Camera*, even more intensively objectify a feminine world view, mostly through an emphasis on the female faces (see photos pages 10-11) and issues (many of Vertov's unrealized projects were also dedicated to women).

The disparity between truth about Lenin as presented in Vertov's film and the truth as prescribed by the party, results from different attitudes toward the presentation of historic events/personalities in art. This time, it was the censors who faced a dilemma: they instantly realized that Vertov's image of Lenin did not comply with the official viewpoint, but they could not deny the fact that the film was created by an impassioned admirer of the communist leader. The best strategy to immobilize such an "ideologically inappropriate" film was to make certain that it would not reach a great number of spectators. This practice was common in the Soviet Union: to cite a contemporary example, Tarkovsky's *The Mirror* (*Zeralko*) was excluded from wide distribution (when it was produced in 1974), as "too difficult" for the common audience, while the actual reason was clearly ideological.

From Vertov's diaries one realizes that he was unaware of the force behind the official—never publicly declared—suppression of film. In his devotion to the communist cause, Vertov

assumed that it was "irresponsible bureaucrats" who tried to harm him and his "kinoks." When the situation failed to improve even after his repeated complaints to the officials in the ministry of cinematography, Vertov became depressed and isolated to the extent that he felt physical pain and insomnia. He complained: "I do not isolate myself—I am isolated!"<sup>14</sup> which was particularly difficult for his extremely outspoken and sociable persona. To those of us who have lived under oppressive regimes, this feeling is quite familiar. "Undesirable but harmless" artists were usually proclaimed "odd" and "crazy," hence undeserving of serious attention. With such labels, many Surrealists, Constructivists, Suprematists, Formalists, and Idealists struggled to survive in authoritarian societies, not only in the USSR, but also in other Stalinist regimes throughout Eastern Europe.

By 1940, Vertov could no longer realize any of his projects—the fact cannot be explained away merely by the outbreak of war. He continued to complain: "Is it possible to die not from physical but creative hunger?...Indeed it is possible!"<sup>15</sup> Vertov was not alone in his sufferings: Mayakovsky's own frustration caused by the Soviet reality led to his suicide, a gesture worthy of a genuine poet. After learning about Mayakovsky's tragic end, Vertov wrote in his 1945 diary: "And suddenly, he could not take it anymore."<sup>16</sup>

For whatever reasons, Vertov accepted the job of an obscure film editor in the Red Army Film Studio. Eisenstein opted for a more rewarding tactic: He atoned his discord with the Party by a prompt recantation of his "incorrect attitude toward history and society," a survivable "coup d'ethique" that Vertov by no means was able to carry out. His dilemma caused by the conflict between truth as seen by the "author-director," and the truth imposed upon him by the government made Vertov agonize over the purpose of his existence as either "a human being or as a schema invented by my critics."<sup>17</sup> Unwilling to sacrifice his own artistic vision, incapable of rejecting his belief in the communist society, prevented from realizing his later projects, and treated as someone who is out of touch with



Soviet reality, Vertov became “sick and tired of everything,” as he described his feelings in the entry of January 1941: “I do not have the energy to cope with the intrigues. . . my nervous system is completely ruined.”<sup>18</sup> His professional situation did not improve even after the war: he spent the last fifteen years of his life, as many other Soviet artists, vegetating, like a “living corpse.”

When we speak of Vertov’s legacy, we mostly refer to his works produced between 1919 and 1940, among them the films that have inspired filmmakers and influenced theorists all over the world. Recently, Vertov’s major essays have become accessible to Western readers, and await a scrutinizing examination in relation to his practical achievements. Such a comparative study would greatly contribute to the theory of the “unstaged” cinema. The Vertov dilemma of our time can be reiterated in the form of the following questions:

“How to go beyond mere recording of the ‘life-facts’?”; “What expressive means are appropriate for transcending the recorded referent *on an aesthetic level*?”; and “How to achieve an *artistic transformation* without destroying the ontological authenticity of the motion picture image?” Vertov’s “warning” still holds: in the “film-thing” that does not “lower its artistic level” the filmmaker’s intervention should be, most of all, concerned with the structural aspect of the work—a notion which must be taken into consideration by those who would attempt to devise theoretical statements about the documentary mode. Vertov’s best films, or particular sequences, continue to serve as a *reminder* that there exists a fundamental distinction between the *cinematic* and other expressive means, as well as between artistic truth and “objective” truth. Unfortunately, very few practitioners and theorists find it necessary to learn from the comparative study of Vertov’s essays and films, thus failing to nurture what Vertov considered the most important capability of a documentary filmmaker—the “cinematic way of seeing” (*kinesteticheskoe vizhu*).

<sup>1</sup>Dziga Vertov, “From ‘Film-Eye’ to ‘Radio-Eye’—From the Alphabet of the Kinoks” (1929) [Ot “kinoglaza” radioglazu”—Iz abzuki kinokov], *Articles, Diaries, Projects* [Stat’i, dnevniki, zamysli], ed. Sergei Drobashenko (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1966) 114. Hereafter cited as *Articles*.

<sup>2</sup>Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida/La Chambre Claire*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Farrar Strauss, 1980) 58.

<sup>3</sup>Vlada Petric, *Constructivism in Film: The Man With the Movie Camera—A Cinematic Analysis* (Cambridge, Great Britain: Cambridge University Press, 1987). See chapters “Phi-effect and Kinesthesia,” “Intervals of Movement,” “Subliminal Propulsion,” “Oneric Impact of Intervals,” 139-176.

<sup>4</sup>Vertov, “Kinoks. Revolution” (1923) [Kinoki. Perevorot], *Articles*, 53.

<sup>5</sup>Vertov, “Kinoks. Revolution” 58; “Film-Truth” (1934) [Kinopravda], *Articles*, 124; “I Want to Share My Experience” (1934) [Khochu podelit’ s’ya opytom], *Articles*, 135.

<sup>6</sup>Vertov, “Kinoks. Revolution,” *Articles*, 55.

<sup>7</sup>Nikolai Lebedev, *Survey of the History of Silent Cinema in the USSR: 1918-1934* [Ocherk istorii kino SSSR: nemoie kino, 1918-1934], (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1965) 206.

<sup>8</sup>Petric 129.

<sup>9</sup>Jay Leyda, *KINO—A History of the Russian and Soviet Film* (New York: Collier Books, 1960) 251

<sup>10</sup>Leyda, 251.

<sup>11</sup>Vertov, “Without Words” (1934) [Bez Slova], *Articles*, 132.

<sup>12</sup>Vertov, *Three Songs About Lenin* and “Film-Eye” (1934) [Tri pesni o Lenine i “kinoglaz”], *Articles*, 139.

<sup>13</sup>Vertov, “About the Love for a Real Person” (1958) [O lyubvi k zhivomu cheloveku], *Articles*, 154.

<sup>14</sup>Vertov, “Notebooks” (9 November 1934), *Articles*, p. 181.

<sup>15</sup>Vertov, “Notebooks” (12 February 1940), *Articles*, 228.

<sup>16</sup>Vertov, “Notebooks” (February 1940), *Articles*, 229.

<sup>17</sup>Vertov, “Notebooks” (4 February 1940) *Articles*, 228.

<sup>18</sup>Vertov, “Notebooks” (Late 1945), *Articles*, 263.

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## An experiment in applying Vertov's "theory of intervals"

Trying to practice my own "cinematic way of seeing" I recently undertook an experiment with an intention to apply Vertov's principle of "intervals" to an old non-narrative film, Lazlo Moholy-Nagy's 1930 abstract work *Light-play in Black, White, Gray* (*Ein Lichtspiel: Schwarz, Weiss, Grau*), to demonstrate the kinesthetic power of the "montage battle." Throughout my work on Vertov and Moholy-Nagy, I was fascinated by their identical attitudes toward the formal aspect of a film structure, especially the kinesthetic movement created by the graphic and dynamic interaction of juxtaposed shots. As early as 1921, while explicating his "script-sketch" (manuscriptskeiz) entitled *Dynamism of The Great City* (*Dynamik der Gross-stadt, 1921-22*), Moholy-Nagy wrote about the necessity of making a film that would function only on an optical level in which "the visual elements are not presented by a logical connection but through the photo/graphic interaction that provides (with its aesthetic unity) a spatio-temporal experience, turning the viewer into an active participant of the city's dynamism" (schalten den Zuschauer aktiv in die Stadtdynamik).<sup>1</sup>

Moholy-Nagy's statement appropriately describes the kinesthetic impact generated by the climactic sequences in *The Man With the Movie Camera*. In addition, the graphic format of the text and the photo-collage included on Moholy-Nagy's shooting board are similarly reminiscent of the way Vertov wrote his manifestos and prepared his own scripts. At roughly the same time as Vertov, Moholy-Nagy also pointed to the significance of the "kinesthetic dynamism accomplished through the juxtaposition among the various geometric forms, photographic compositions and movements."<sup>2</sup> Vertov also considered the "geometric extraction of the movement" (geometricheskii ekstrakt dvizheniia)<sup>3</sup> and the "fantastic movement which is law-abiding" (zakonomernaya fantastika dvizheniia)<sup>4</sup> as essential to the kinesthetic impact of the "film-thing." The moment I saw Moholy-Nagy's 6-minute film, *Light-Play*, I decide to interrelate

these two filmmakers by applying Vertov's montage principle of "intervals" to Moholy-Nagy's cinematic structure. I treated Moholy-Nagy's film as archival footage whose shots and frames were used as the "film bricks" (Vertov's term) reorganized into a new structure as a typical cinematic appropriation.

The original film by Moholy-Nagy consists of only 50 shots (exclusively close-ups) of the rotating Light Modulator (a metal sculpture with moving parts), which Moholy-Nagy constructed with the sole intention of using it as the "star" (or referent) for his film. I ordered a negative print of Moholy-Nagy's film which for me represented "white," and a high-contrast print that I considered as "black," while the original print was treated as "gray." The editing process of these three prints (amounting to 20 minutes of projected time) took about two years; the next four years were spent in finding the most appropriate printing procedure for the fragile workprint. The first answer print was made in 1988, and since then, each new print has been intentionally altered in the way the film's sections are tinted and the sound track is mixed. The most recent print was made in January 1991 and it has a newly constructed sound track, while the tinted sections are altered in the intensity and tonality of their hues.

Following the claims of the French avant-garde filmmakers of the 1920's that, for a genuine abstract film, it does not matter whether it is projected backward or forward, my assistant Jim Lane and I began to edit the three prints *from the tail*, starting with the last shot in Moholy-Nagy's original film. Inspired by Vertov's principle of constructing a film upon "intervals," we decided to edit the shots according to the incessant movement of the geometric forms (circles, squares, and triangles) that appear in every image, due to the rotation of the modulator. In order to accommodate Moholy-Nagy's preoccupation with the "pattern of three," and after the first few sequences in which the montage rhythm was still quite slow, we decided to consult a computer which had determined how many frames of the given (original) shot had to be cut out in order to increase the montage pace of the sequence according to the *arithmetic* increments, which

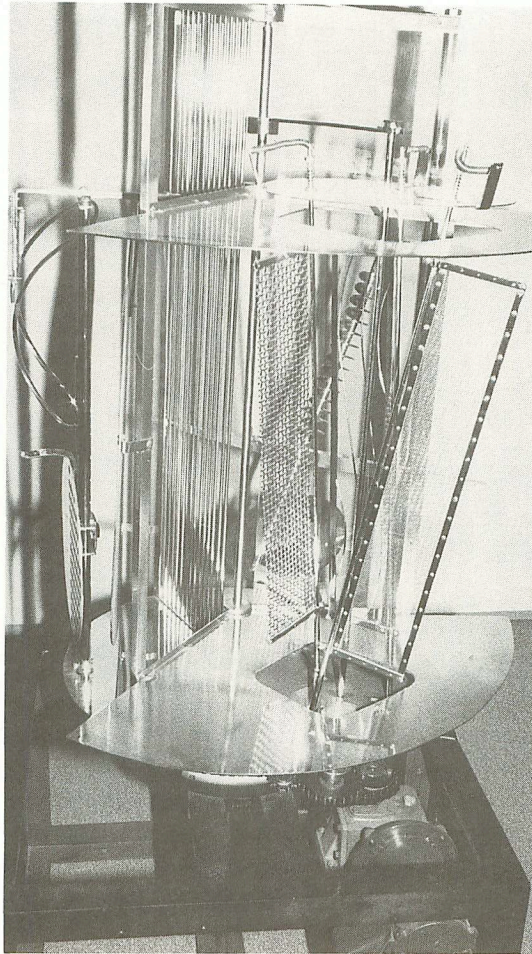


produced a surprisingly aggressive “battle of intervals.” As the editing progressed, we realized that it was no longer possible to edit one (or two) frame “shots” with a splicer; therefore we turned to an optical printer which enabled us to link single frames. This phase of editing clearly demonstrated what Vertov meant by “kinesthetic explosion,” as some of the “montage pieces” were edited by following the computer’s instructions resonating with a powerful impact when projected on the big screen. At the completion of the editing phase, we counted in the new version 1285 shots, many only one, two, or three frames long, including all the 50 original shots in this new structure.

The construction of the sound track went through two stages” first, with the help of my student Guy La Crosby, three separate (and lengthy) collections of noises (a steel mill, a brewery, an automobile plant) were recorded. Then, Michael Callahan, a sound engineer, merged the three groups of sound *without* seeing the film, but by following the timetable established by the computer according to the “pattern of three,” gradually increasing the intensity of sound. Some startling synchronicities appeared: e.g., at one point the human voice appeared among the noises! We decided to leave this in because it coincides with the appearance of Moholy-Nagy’s own hands—the only human element in this film!

In accordance with Moholy-Nagy’s instruction that his Modulator be lit by three complementary colors to produce a chromatic light-play, we decided to tint the footage in red, yellow, and blue. While the sound is heard from the beginning of the reconstructed film, the chromatic variations coincide with its third part, gradually fusing into an intricate color pulsation that enhances the montage climax. Simultaneously, the intensity of the sound increases along with the intensification of the kinesthetic impact.

The final result of the experiment is a cinematic appropriation, three times longer than the original film (which acts as a prologue in the new film-structure), and connected with the new structure by animated intertitles designed by Steve Eagle in the Constructivist style to comply with the concept on which the film is made and presented—a “tribute to Moholy-Nagy, dedicated to Dziga Vertov,” and signed by Vlada Petric, supervisor of the Experiment.



Moholy-Nagy's *Light-Play*

<sup>1</sup>Lazlo Moholy-Nagy, *Malerei, Fotografie, Film* [Painting, Photography, Film]

(Munich: Albert Langen Verlag, 1927) 120.

<sup>2</sup>Moholy-Nagy 10

<sup>3</sup>Vertov, “We. A Variant of a Manifesto” (1922) [My. Variant manifesta], *Articles, Diaries, Projects*, ed. Sergei Drobashenko (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1966) 47.

<sup>4</sup>Vertov 49.