

Post-Communist

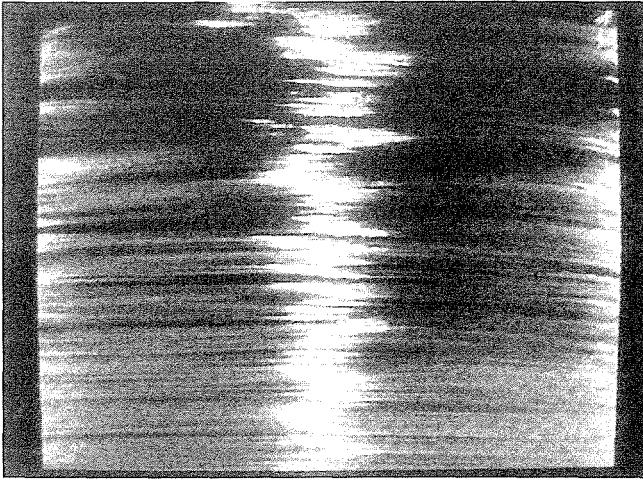
Notes on Some Vertov Stills

To read a work . . . is to allow yourself to lose the bearing which assured you of your sovereign distance from the other, which assured you of the distinction between subject and object, active and passive, between past and present (the latter can neither be suppressed nor ignored); lastly it is to lose your sense of the division between the space of the work and the world onto which it opens. CLAUDE LEFORT, "The Image of the Body and Totalitarianism"

Islamism and avant-garde art . . . *les extremes se touchant*. SUSAN BUCK-MORSS, *Thinking Past Terror*

Still

The still is still here—not quite present, but uncertainly remaining. It lingers, suspended and mute in the absence of the work, after the completion of its diegetic movement, after we think we've processed it at the level of experience or cognition. Conventionally, we are trained to grasp it as a part of an absent totality, a stand-in that leads us back to a conscious memory of a specific scene, a general plot, an ideological



1. Dziga Vertov, *Man with a Movie Camera*, 1929. Film still.

operation, or a formal convention. It is an agent of recalling and preserving, though it sometimes brings with it something we never fully experienced, something that hits us in an untimely or belated way.

However we assume it to operate, the still is a kind of ruin, bearing witness to violence in more ways than one. The present text takes this ruinous violence as its starting point, responding not to a self-contained work but to an image that has been arrested and cut off from its original context, detoured from its presumed destination, exposed to unforeseeable readings and reinscriptions. Yet while the image has been deprived of its original time and space as the absolute anchor of meaning, the still has a certain (displaced) role to play: we know that the image is not just anything we want it to be, that it doesn't come out of nowhere or submit passively to our willing manipulation. It is an irreducibly singular image taken from Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) (fig. 1).¹

It will be immediately apparent to anyone familiar with the film that this procedure is no coincidence—that it borrows its strategic resources from the very thing it violates, if only to exceed it, making the film tremble from within. This trembling calls out for what Walter Benjamin called a “constructive” reading, rather than a pious historicism that would be content to establish *Man with a Movie Camera* either as the progenitor of an idealized digital revolution in which the empowered “image manipulator” reigns supreme or, conversely, as the paternal guarantor of a beleaguered academic avant-garde anxious to protect its authority in the intellectual division of labor.²

Hailed by these antithetical voices, both of which imply a certain kind of closure (the one celebratory, the other melancholic), I want to ask, "Is that all?" This is the question that haunts Roland Barthes's essay "The Third Meaning: Research Notes on Some Eisenstein Stills." It comes at a moment when Barthes, having exhaustively accounted for the formal and ideological codes at work in an Eisenstein film still, is confronted with something that refuses to fit into his preestablished theoretical matrix, exceeding the structuralist mandate of making evident the image's meaning. It fulfills no apparent purpose in the functioning of the film, yet it remains there, "disturbing—like a guest who obstinately sits on saying nothing when one has no use for him."³ This useless, uncanny guest demands that we bear witness to what Barthes calls the "gash" that it effects in the process of signification. According to Barthes, such an encounter is foreclosed by our everyday viewing habits, ensnared as we inevitably are in the diegetic movement of cinema, which tends to "suture" the gash and absorb it as a "signifying accident."

It is for this reason that Barthes praises the "major artifact" of the still for its capacity to overflow the function typically assigned to it: providing a metonymic sample of a film text assumed to otherwise coincide with itself in its temporal unfolding, what he calls the "operative time" of cinema. Brought to a standstill, pinned down in front of us, the image does not secure our analytical gaze; paradoxically, it is only in being arrested that it opens onto an enigmatic temporality of reading that oscillates in an incalculable way between past, present, and future: the third meaning "appears necessarily as a luxury, an expenditure with no exchange. This luxury does not yet belong to today's politics, but nevertheless *already* to tomorrow's."⁴

This essay will attempt to unfold the implications of Barthes's cryptic evocation of a politics-to-come by performing a historical reading of a still from *Man with a Movie Camera*. In keeping with Barthes's sense of the still as an interruption of "operative time," reading historically will here involve cutting the image out of the established narratives into which it has hitherto been inserted and placing it in relation to other images, times, and spaces—which, as we shall see, are in fact uncannily proximate to the oeuvre of Vertov himself.⁵ This displacement will be informed by a certain post-Communism. This term marks both the specific post-1989 geopolitical conjuncture in which any contemporary practice of reading must take place and a theoretical orientation at odds

with—but not simply opposed to—the neo-Communist revival that has taken place among some political theorists and art critics of the Left during the past decade. The aim of my reading is to provoke critical reflection on the heritage of world history imparted to us from Vertov, yet informed by Jacques Derrida's caution, in *Specters of Marx*, that “an inheritance is never gathered together, it is never one with itself. . . . If the readability of a legacy were given, natural, univocal, if it did not call for and at the same time defy interpretation, we would never have anything to inherit from it . . . one always inherits from a secret—which says ‘read me, will you ever be able to do so?’”⁶

Mirror of Production

As suggested above, Vertov was, up to a point, familiar with the violence of the still, emerging as it does out of more general violence at work in cinematic meaning itself: “to edit; to wrest, through the camera, whatever is most typical, most useful, from life; to organize the pieces wrested from life into a meaningful rhythmic visual order.”⁷ *Man with a Movie Camera* famously makes this process visible, especially in the scene at the editing table that cuts between moving images and their constitutive stills, exposing the undecidable play between human and technical animation that underlies cinematic diegesis. The latter is shown to be an effect of a dynamic act of production, illuminating the status of the film qua signifying visual structure and industrial artifact. Throughout the film, cinematic labor is foregrounded and analogized with the other labor practices it depicts (and which it depicts itself depicting). The scene at the editing table makes this especially clear: the work of the editor is likened to the work of textile production, as both involve the cutting and sewing together of heterogeneous pieces into a continuous socio-material text. Yet because of this very visibility, the seamlessness usually achieved by the ideological mechanism of “suture” is here suspended, making it available to consciousness. As Erik Barnouw puts it in a typical assessment, “The artificiality is deliberate: an avant-garde determination to suppress illusion in favor of heightened awareness.”⁸

Barnouw's remark captures the dialectical inversion that animates Vertov's epistemology, which was inseparable from his praxis as a whole. Influenced by futurism, Vertov repudiated attempts by “literary” film-

makers to transcend the perceptual and cognitive dynamism of modernity by appealing to a mythically natural human sensorium. For the latter, film would reproduce a static, pregiven perceptual world (whether real or fictional), treating the camera as a transparent medium passively reflecting reality rather than intervening upon and negating its givenness. It was precisely this capacity of man, supplemented and extended by technology, to negate given reality that constituted the essence of the Communist project within which Vertov was immersed. Equipped with a movie camera, man would not merely show this process from the outside but would materially enact it, giving an immanent demonstration of the new principle upon which Communist society would be founded: the sovereignty of the collective as a producer of objects, films, and ultimately its own self-consciousness. As Vertov put it early in his career, “We/Want/To/Make/Ourselves.”⁹ Insofar as industrial Communist “making” in general involved dynamism, speed, automation, repetition, fragmenting, decomposing, and recomposing, a revolutionary cinema had to make these processes central to its own synaesthetic articulation of a “meaningful rhythmic visual order,” or “visual symphony,” as it is called at the opening of the film.

Not present to the naked, merely human eye, “film truth” was graspable only through an active dialectical vision that Vertov figured in terms of reading and writing: on the one hand, Kino-eye performed a kind of hermeneutics of the social text, “the communist decoding of the world on the basis of what actually exists.” Yet freed from its encryption in naïve perceptual reality, the hidden meaning of the world would have to pass back through another media—the “absolute film writing” comprising the final film text—in order to become legible. The perceptual shock and disorientation initially effected in viewers by these “absolute” cinematographic strategies would break the passivity of reception mandated by conventional cinema, requiring them to come into their own as active readers or coparticipants in the decoding of visual meaning, and by analogy the project of social construction as a whole.

The film exhibits an oft-celebrated self-reflexivity concerning the social and perceptual activity of cinematic reception.¹⁰ Viewers watch the filmmaker making the film and then, enabled by his visual techniques, watch themselves producing the material foundations of society and enjoying its fruits. Yet this self-visibility is taken to an even higher level when we recall that spectatorship is itself overtly visualized throughout

the film. It is posited at once as an internal, partial cog in the everyday lifecycle, as well as a privileged means of making that cycle available in its entirety to consciousness. The circular structure of self-conscious spectatorship allegorizes the infinite spiraling forward of historical development itself, what Jean Baudrillard, once called “[man’s] continual deciphering of himself through his works . . . reflected by this operational mirror, this sort of an ideal of a productivist ego.”¹¹ Following Jean-Luc Nancy, who commented slightly later on the “mirror of production” set up by Communism, we can say that Vertov aims to interpellate an “operative community,” which is to say, a community grounded and unified in a shared process of working together, a gathering of “human beings defined as producers . . . and fundamentally as the producers of their own essence in the form of their labor or their work.”¹² Vertov’s operative community is one of immanence; ideally, it is not moved or marked by anything other than its own internal circuits of production, distribution, and “simultaneous collective reception,” to cite the key phrase from Benjamin Buchloh’s authoritative account of the constructivists’ post-*faktura* aspiration to radically redefine the conditions of mass spectatorship in line with the processes of rapid communist industrialization—and, implicitly, national-popular subjectivization—in the late twenties and early thirties.¹³

Caesura

Yet, there is an event in the film in which this operational dialectic of self-recognition suffers a hitch, short-circuiting what Annette Michelson describes as “the formal instantiation of a general community and a common stake in the project . . . that has radically reorganized the property relations subtending industrial production.”¹⁴ Something other than the famous dynamism of intervals that otherwise structure the film, this event should be understood as a caesura in the synaesthetic movement of the film’s “meaningful rhythmic visual order.” Whether in music or poetry, the auxiliary function of the caesura seems fairly straightforward: it is a gap or delay that ensures the proper spacing and timing of the elements of a work. But if this gap is conventionally associated with an ultimate continuity and functionality, it can also portend lack and

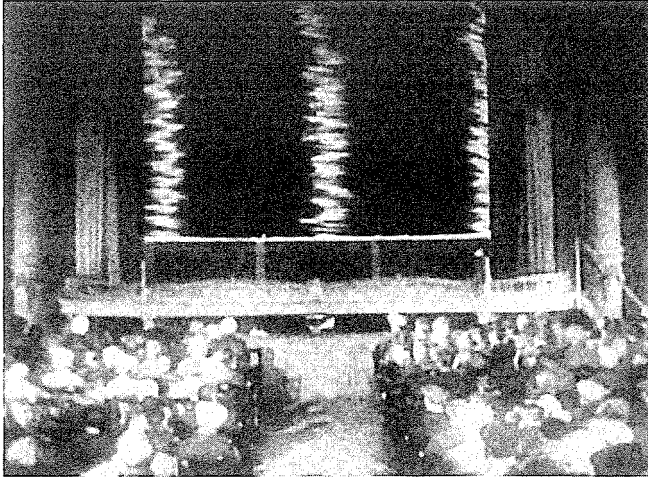
insecurity, betraying its etymological derivation from the violence of cutting.¹⁵

The caesura comes at an emblematic moment of spectatorial self-consciousness: the third and final *mise-en-scène* of the movie theater, in which we as viewers alternate between a position of exteriority to the audience, viewing them viewing, and one of immanence, in which our field of vision appears to coincide with theirs (fig. 2). But any such symmetry is lost as the film cuts abruptly from the face of a bemused audience member to a visual field evacuated of any recognizable figure, human or otherwise. What replaces the figural self-visibility of the audience?

It is not nothing, in any simple sense. Quivering with an arrhythmic intensity, a black surface appears that at once saturates and doubles the screen itself. Three bands of light traverse the surface, providing a reflective index of its inhuman palpitations. Though evenly spaced and vertically aligned, they do not function to symmetrically center our gaze or to hold together the screen, which appears on the verge of being shaken apart. An upright, columnar orientation—associated perhaps with the stability of a corporeal or architectonic *gestalt*—only appears in its dissolution, as its form comes undone. Precarious from the beginning, the linear contours of the bands of light progressively break down, giving way to a series of frenzied electromagnetic waves whose oscillation traces a palpable disturbance in the equilibrium of the perceptual field.

Punctuated by several shots of the audience, this formless, flickering surface holds our gaze for some fifteen seconds before returning to a familiar montage sequence involving dancers and musicians. This is long enough to leave some impression in our perceptual awareness, yet too ephemeral *vis-à-vis* the diegetic rhythm of the film to become available for cognitive scrutiny. The gap passes us by, or rather passes through us, in such a way that it might easily be absorbed as what Barthes called a “signifying accident,” an ultimately forgettable supplement to the essential movement of the film.

This seismic disturbance is something other than the deliberate shaking up of perception effected by the kinetic dynamism of the rest of the film: from the cranking of the camera, the whirling of the spindle, the chugging of the wheels of the locomotive, or the montage technique itself, the intensity of mechanico-muscular motion evoked throughout



2. Dziga Vertov, *Man with a Movie Camera*, 1929. Film still.

the film continues to produce a more general sense of linear and cyclical self-propulsion, allegorizing class consciousness as the motor of history. In both form and content, the film's kinesis is always oriented around doing something and going somewhere: each cog in the film's intricate dialectical machinery makes its contribution to the synaesthetic realization of the "meaningful rhythmic visual order."

Even before being fixed as a still, the caesura opens onto a region uncannily suspended between motion and stasis, activity and passivity, life and death. The irregular pulsations of the surface seem depleted of teleological energy, functional purpose, or communicative significance; they do not appear to be going anywhere, doing anything, or saying anything. Nevertheless, something happens, or comes to pass; the force of the happening seizes our attention, but with a strange indifference to our presence. In the synaesthetic terms of the film, we might say that in the caesura, we are exposed to a kind of senseless visual noise, a murmuring that announces, but in which nothing is announced. This is not the glorious audiovisual cacophony of the city-as-symphony, the rhythmic humming and clanking and riveting of industrial modernity. Nor does it provide a quiet, contemplative pause where we might take a breath and gather ourselves between the disorienting assaults of montage. This caesura is restive, rather than restful. Its cutting leaves what Barthes would call a "gash razed in meaning" that cannot be easily sutured, even by the most deliberate of dialectical surgeons.

It is the coming-to-pass of this murmuring wound that is put under

arrest in the still, reactivating the conscious and unconscious traces it may have left within us, liberating it from the “operative time” of cinema. Yet even when the gears of the film are brought to a standstill, enabling the singularity of this image to show up without the burden of movement, it refuses to stay in place. Though it is seemingly present, frozen in the here and now, we still manage to miss it, arriving at the moment of its withdrawal. As Barthes says, the image “compels an interrogative reading,” yet it does not unfold itself in response to our questioning. Not because of its infinite, ineffable depth, but precisely because it doesn’t stand for anything, not even itself.

Testifying to the “difficulty in naming” he undergoes in the face of the obtuse meaning, Barthes asks, “How do you describe something that doesn’t represent anything?” We can take this one step further and ask: how does this arepresentational image affect us as readers, split as we already are between immanent identification with the Communist audience pictured in the film and the position of irrecoverable geopolitical and historical distance any contemporary audience must now occupy?

An Empty Place

Barthes’s remark on the signifier’s “permanent state of depletion”—its lack of any positive substance subtending below, behind, or within it—resonates in an interesting way with Claude Lefort’s contention that with the advent of democracy, “the locus of power becomes an empty place.” Conceived as more than a set of institutional practices, democracy for Lefort involves a “symbolic mutation” in the representation of society, in which the latter is deprived of any transcendent source of legitimacy, rendering it an “ungraspable” enigma. Previous political forms relied on a logic of incorporation, in which society was figured as a finite, unified body whose constituent parts each played their given, proper role. With democracy, on the other hand, society is “disincorporated”: it loses the bodily gestalt or figure that would have provided society with a secure, bounded image of itself upon which to base judgments and undertake plans. This loss at once constitutes and blocks the identity of “the people” that comes into being with the passing of the old regime. While a potentially limitless array of particular bodies compete to fill in the empty place, none can ever coincide with it in a

universal way: there is no complete representative of society, insofar as the latter is defined essentially as an enigma. The people are deprived of the possibility of transparent self-visibility; it is only visually incarnated insofar as it becomes the object of conflictual mediations. In other words, the appearance of the people occurs only in the event of their disappearance as an immediate entity: that is, with “the dissolution of the markers of certainty” and an experience of “a fundamental indeterminacy as to the basis of power, law, and knowledge, and as to the basis of relations between self and other.”¹⁶

Lefort’s thought on democracy developed in response to the Western Left’s failure to come to terms with Soviet totalitarianism. While the crimes of Stalin were duly denounced when they came to light under Khrushchev, many in the West subscribed to the analysis of Trotsky, who held that Stalinism represented a “degeneration” of the original program of the Bolsheviks, a “parasitic” aberration that would correct itself with the maturation of the revolution. According to Lefort, the Trotskyite analysis failed to interrogate the principle upon which Bolshevism erected itself: the possession of “scientific” knowledge of the material foundations of history and class struggle, the laws of which were taken to mandate the establishment of the authoritative body of the party, supplemented by its various organs. Lefort saw in Bolshevism the immanent possibility of totalitarianism qua political form, which he understood as a kind of reaction formation to the ungrounding of the social: “An apparatus is set up which tends to stave off this threat, which attempts to weld power and society back together again, and to efface all signs of social division, to banish the indetermination that haunts the democratic experience.” At the level of the imaginary, this involved the reincorporation of the people through the articulation of two key images: the body and the machine.¹⁷ Society was figured as a well-functioning technological organism, with muscular and mechanical operations becoming interchangeable in the carrying through of the collective labor of class-conscious social construction. Anything exceeding the operations of this organism became an “enemy of the people,” an obstacle to the proper unfolding of history itself, deserving of official denunciation, if not outright elimination.

What does it mean to reread Vertov through the lens of Lefort’s analysis of the totalitarian body—and its potential unworking or depletion? Any association of Vertov with a such a model of community risks

affiliating itself with the simplistic teleological narrative of art historian Boris Groys, who argues that the seeds of Stalinist terror were inherently germinating in the early Soviet avant-garde's project of engineering subjects-of-history appropriate for a new world of egalitarian industrialization—a post-utopian admonishment of the sort caricatured by Slavoj Žižek when he writes, “benevolent as it is, it will inevitably end in the gulag!”¹⁸ Indeed, Vertov's reputation as an exemplary practitioner of the critical avant-garde has long been founded precisely in opposition to the aesthetico-political imaginary of Stalinism. Annette Michelson, in her authoritative introduction to Vertov's writings, explicitly analogizes his gradual marginalization in the Soviet film industry with the fate of Trotsky, mourning both as bearers of a lost revolutionary potentiality stifled by socialist realism and Stalinism more generally. Though referring to Eisenstein rather than Vertov, this narrative is echoed in the self-expository introduction to the anthology *October*: “‘But why *October*?’ our readers still inquire? . . . *October* is exemplary for us of a specific historical moment in which artistic practice joined with critical theory in a project of social construction. . . . We had no desire to perpetuate the mythology of the revolution. Rather, we wished to claim that the unfinished, analytic project of constructivism—aborted by the consolidation of the Stalinist bureaucracy, distorted by the recuperation of the Soviet avant-garde into Western idealist aesthetics—was required for a consideration of the aesthetic practices of our time.”¹⁹

At one level, the formal strategies innovated by Vertov—“the Trotsky of cinema,” as Michelson describes him—are obviously incommensurable with the visual culture of Stalinism, realizing a dynamic activity of perception rather than a reified pantheon of heroes to be passively emulated. However, I have intimated above that even within the avant-garde masterpiece that is *Man with a Movie Camera*, it is possible to discern the structure of an “ideal of a productivist ego,” whose would-be circularity bears within it a potential for exclusionary violence.

It is with reference to this potential or actual violence that I suggest we read the caesura as an ungraspable moment of depletion in the collective body constructed by Vertov, an index of “the indeterminateness that haunts the democratic experience.” For however fleeting a moment, we witness a certain disincorporation, the dissolution of the markers of visual certainty required for the stabilization of the identity of the people. It is in this interruption of dialectical circularity that the image

calls out for a historical reading in the sense given this term by Eduardo Cadava, when he speaks of “the emergence and survival of an image that, telling us it can longer show anything, nevertheless shows and bears witness to what history has silenced, to what, no longer here, and arising from the darkest nights of memory, haunts us and encourages us to remember the deaths and losses for which we remain, still today, responsible.”²⁰

Scotoma

Such a reading can proceed by reading the caesura that interrupts *Man with a Movie Camera* alongside a remarkable film still that is to be found on page 137 of *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*. It shows a ghostly figure ensconced in a cloak, who appears to face the camera. But where we might expect to recognize this figure’s face and meet its gaze, we encounter instead an aperture that exposes us to a kind of flat, impenetrable darkness, almost as if the still—or is it our eye?—has had a hole burnt into it by sunlight refracted through a magnifying glass.

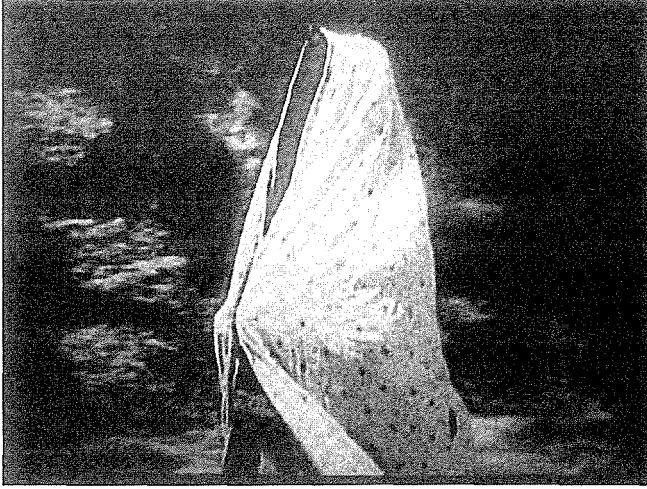
Frozen in the still, cut off from whatever cinematic movement it was meant to assist, this blind spot, or scotoma, effects a kind uncanniness in the viewer, piercing us with the sense of some forgotten, abysmal loss. But when processed through Vertov’s epistemological machine, we grasp the dialectical function that this moment of obscurity plays in the “communist decoding of the world.” Far from accidental, it provides precisely the challenge set out for Kino-eye in 1924, “to show people without masks, without makeup, to catch them through the eye of the camera . . . to read their thoughts, laid bare by the camera. Kino-eye as the possibility of making the invisible visible, the unclear clear, the disguised overt, the acted non-acted; making falsehood truth.”²¹

When the still is returned to its original context, we recognize the power relations implied by Vertov’s epistemological metaphors of enlightenment, revelation, unmasking—and the broader project of social construction they served to legitimize. In *Three Songs of Lenin*, we witness the actualization of these optical metaphors through the bodies of subjects marked pejoratively as other, those who haunt Vertov’s project of building a “visual bond between the peoples of the U.S.S.R and

the world based on the platform of the communist decoding of what actually exists.”²²

Vertov made *Three Songs of Lenin* in 1934, five years after *Man with a Movie Camera* and ten years after the death of Lenin. The film commemorates the late leader’s revolutionary accomplishments by recording songs of mourning among workers and peasants across the USSR. Though subdued significantly, the film continues to deploy several of the unorthodox cinematic strategies explored in *Man with a Movie Camera*, reaffirming the analogy between the activation of spectatorial awareness and the self-realization of the Communist subject. Yet rather than the urban proletariat of *Man with a Movie Camera*, the emergent Communist subjects featured in the later film are bearers of an unsettling form of cultural difference: they are the Muslim peoples of Central Asia, a region inherited by the Bolsheviks from the Tsarist Empire and subsequently referred to as the Soviet East. I want to briefly consider the first of these three songs and attempt to draw it into the constellation of questions provoked by the enigma of the caesura that lies at the origin of this essay.

The title page of the first song reads “My Face Was in a Dark Prison,” establishing a first-person narrative of transition from the imprisonment of the past to the emancipated space of the present, a space that enables free speech and public self-disclosure. Following the title page, the film opens with an exemplar of that past, obscure imprisonment: The camera follows a woman covered from head to toe in a chador, her face concealed by an additional black garment, metonymizing the “dark prison” (fig. 3). As this figure passes in front of the camera, a soundtrack of Central Asian folk music begins, guiding us for several minutes through the physically and culturally decrepit landscape of an anonymous eastern town. Among the ruined Islamic arches and narrow streets, turbaned men are shown malingering listlessly, apparently lacking in productive capacity. A mosque appears, but only through a delirious, unfocused shot that echoes the simulation of “intoxicated” vision in the bar room scene of *Man with a Movie Camera*, signaling a temporary aberration in consciousness: religion as the “opiate of the people,” as Marx might have put it. But from this state of visual impairment, the film cuts to a stable, elevated vantage point, enabling us to gaze down on worshippers kneeling in unison as the muezzin calls prayer. This opening sequence, which features seven shots



3. Dziga Verov, *Three Songs of Lenin*, 1934, Song 1: "My Face Was in a Dark Prison." Film still.

of veiled women, is intercut with the (written) words of the first-person "I" announced in the title: "My face was in a dark prison. I led a blind life. In ignorance and darkness, I was a slave without chains."

The author of these words becomes apparent as the sequence abruptly cuts to an image of a Muslim woman who sits writing at a window. While her hair is covered by a scarf, her face is entirely visible as she sits pensively with pen in hand. "But a ray of truth began to shine—" she writes, "the dawn of Lenin's truth." As she appears, the soundtrack also makes an abrupt cut from the unfamiliar sounds of the folk music to the upright call of the bugle, which issues from a column of Communist Youth as they march toward the decadent, crumbling town. As she notices their arrival, she feels compelled to leave the seclusion of the house and walk unaccompanied through town to the "Turkic Women's Club." Recalling the analogy of window shades and eyelids in *Man with a Movie Camera*, as she opens the door to go inside, her action is dialectically echoed at the level of another body: we see a different young woman joyously throwing off her veil, opening herself onto the enlightening gaze of the camera.

The eyes of the woman are shown gazing upward as the song conjures for her a monumental vision of Lenin's generous contributions to the lives of the eastern peoples: the film cuts from town to country, where men, women, and children, with the help of Russian experts, are shown enthusiastically realizing Soviet plans for the modernization of agriculture. "My State Farm!" reads an intertitle, as a woman feeding a huge

flock of chickens is intercut with the graceful visual patterns of a mechanized harvester and a fertilizer plane. In between driving tractors, assembling parts, and picking cotton, male and female workers gather to read newspapers announcing the tenth anniversary of Lenin's death, but the soundtrack has once again shifted to the upright marching of the brass band rather than the melancholic dirge. Injunctive intertitles continue to appear: "My Country!" "My Land!" "My Family!" "My Hands!" A darkened room is suddenly illuminated by a lightbulb, revealing the face of a Muslim woman: "He made light of the darkness, a garden of the desert, and life of death."

Unveiling Unveiling

The opacity of the veil is quickly dispelled by Vertov, as he stages the literal unveiling of women in order to allegorize the coming to class consciousness of an entire population—a process of Communist secularization that depends on the suppression of Islamic "backwardness" in particular, and religion in general, for its sense of historical purpose.

This weaving together of secular enlightenment, economic development, and the liberation of women can be identified as part of a determinate Soviet ideological nexus, the consequences of which can still be felt today. It developed as a panicked response on the part of the Bolshevik leadership to the indeterminate, empty place left in Central Asia following the crumbling of the Tsarist administration. As Ahmed Rashid reports, the period between 1917 and 1923 saw a "brief flowering of ideological ferment" in which a variety of political discourses, most of which incorporated Islamic elements, competed to set the terms for an alternative modernity in the region—and a postcolonial relationship to Russia.²³ Along with conservative religious revivalism and tribal and clan autonomism, Rashid sees two discourses as being of especial interest: first, he mentions Jadidism, an Islamic reform movement dating from the late nineteenth century that stressed pan-Turkic self-determination from Russia and the inventive reinterpretation (*itijihad*) of the Koran vis-à-vis liberal constitutional principles to which Central Asian intellectuals had been exposed in Europe. Second, Rashid draws our attention to the little-known phenomenon of Muslim Communism, a more radical offshoot of Jadidism that nevertheless stressed the primacy

of national liberation over the strategy of an eventual global proletarian revolution. Under the slogan “East Is Not West, Muslims Are Not Russians,” intellectuals such as Mir Said Sultan Galiev set up a Muslim Communist Party and showed solidarity with the Bolsheviks, helping to enlist some 250,000 Central Asians in the Russian civil war. Theoretically, Galiev’s position was in keeping with Lenin’s “Theses on the National Question,” though as Rashid points out, the self-determination ultimately envisioned by Lenin for the peoples of Greater Russia could not countenance actual secession. The elimination of these movements during what Rashid calls the “reconquest” of Central Asia legitimized itself by denouncing the “reactionary” and “decadent” character of Islam, which was brutally suppressed in all its forms. It was in the name of a de-Islamicized class consciousness—in which the “woman question” was a central battleground—that Stalin carried out the forced settlement and collectivization of nomadic herders. This policy had devastating consequences: some 1.5 million Kazaks alone are estimated to have died during the first decade of their recolonization by the Bolsheviks.

This is a postcolonial history scotomized by Michelson’s authoritative, celebratory introduction to the oeuvre of Vertov in 1984, as well as her obliquely ambivalent and disciplinarily eclectic analysis of *Three Songs of Lenin*, published in *October* six years later.²⁴ In the latter text, Michelson notes the persistence of various modes of avant-garde experimentation in the film—the still, the superimposition, the heterodox spatiotemporal rhythms and camera angles—and cites Vertov’s crucial declaration of the continuity between *Songs* and his earlier work: “It required making use of all previous experience of kino-eye filmings, all acquired knowledge, it meant the registration and careful study of all other previous work on this theme. . . . In this respect *Man With a Movie Camera* and *Enthusiasm* were of great help to our production group. These were, so to speak, films that beget films.”²⁵ Claiming an interest in “the location of the precise signification, its political function within the historical situation of the USSR in the 1930s,” Michelson distinguishes *Songs* from *Man* on the grounds that the former was an instrumental project officially commissioned and approved by the state, and thus a turn away from the “wholly autonomous metacinematic celebration of cinema as a mode of production and epistemological inquiry” represented by *Man*. Michelson reads the 1934 film as a “monument of cinematic hagiography” that enacts a transvaluation of the spatial and pictorial logic of the tripartite Eastern Orthodox

iconostasis into cinematic terms, with Lenin, the Lost Liberator, supplanting Christ as a figure that is both an anthropomorphic representation and material ('indexical') emanation of a transcendent presence "located on the boundary between the human and the divine." Central to Michelson's analysis of the locally inflected religious resonance of *Songs* is Vertov's foregrounding of the "folk tradition of the female mourner" and the "extremely rich tradition of the oral lament traversing Russian literature."

Appealing to the account, written in the forties by Freudian anthropologist Geza Roheim, of the "practices of the tribal order on which the sense of the dead—of the murdered father—is felt as a potentially powerful threat that behooves the mourner to seek protection through magic," Michelson effectively hypostatizes and universalizes the female figures around which *Songs* revolves, thus falling prey to two inexcusable ideological operations: first, while acknowledging the "hagiographic" conventions employed by Vertov himself, she takes for granted the documentary and ethnographic self-evidence of the female mourner's "tribute to their dead liberator"; second, she collapses all of the women featured in the film into a generalized "Russian" psychological, cultural, and religious disposition, thus disavowing the specificity of the violent anti-Islamic campaign in which Vertov was partaking in the name of enlightened class consciousness.

This campaign is one of the historical contexts within which it is necessary to read Vertov's practice in general, and *Three Songs of Lenin* in particular, a film to which he explicitly repeated his early 1924 injunction: "to show people without masks, without makeup; to catch them with camera's eye . . . to read their thoughts, laid by kino-eye."²⁶ Rather than a passive vehicle of an aberrant Stalinist policy beyond his control, it is evident in both his film and his writing that Vertov played an enthusiastic role in legitimizing this project, which, as Rosalind Morris has recently shown, Lenin and Trotsky had themselves sanctified in their highly gendered denunciations of pan-Islamism throughout the early twenties: "Lenin the giant and the beloved Ilyich, close friend and great leader . . . that is how Lenin's image is seen by the emancipated Turkmen and Uzbek; that is how he appears to the doubly, triply emancipated woman of the Soviet East."²⁷

While Michelson concludes her analysis with an oblique lamentation of the way in which Vertov's pioneering "assault upon the conditions

and ideology of cinematic representation” had by 1934 come to serve in a process of mourning and monumentalizing “a deeply cathected image of the founder and the liberator,” she abstains from any explicit *political* judgment on the hagiographic dimension of *Songs*, a film that cites and hybridizes, in virtuosic fashion, the techniques of each supposed phase of the Soviet avant-garde from formalist *faktura* to documentary factography to monumental mythography.²⁸ While purporting to elucidate the film’s “political function in the USSR of the 1930s,” Michelson’s analysis ends up positing a Russo-centric narrative of artistic and cultural continuity that takes the formal logic of Orthodox iconography and “tribal” mourning practice as its supreme measure, disavowing the extent to which these frames of reference—and the historical process they aim to analyze—are predicated on the absenting of Islam and, specifically, the contested modes of gendered personhood marking the latter in the context of the Soviet imperialism. Michelson’s analysis is thus highly ambivalent; in one sense it registers what Lefort called the “permanence of the theologico-political” in Soviet ideology, but it explains this away with reference to the residual, regressive traces of local religious tradition to which Vertov found it necessary to appeal in his interpellation of the Soviet masses during the thirties. By implication, then, the full-fledged modernist project of *Man with a Movie Camera*—the “wholly autonomous metacinematic celebration of filmmaking as a mode of production and mode of epistemological inquiry”—was *not* marked by this aberrant, if necessary, appeal to the theological, belonging instead to the universal realm of social construction, in which the immanent actuality of man qua producer, rather than the mystical transcendence of God, provides the ground of political community. Yet without simply collapsing the two films in either formal and ideological terms, it is worth questioning the extent to which these figures can be rigorously separated, and whether such an attempt at separation itself does not set the conditions for a certain kind of covert theological violence against those who appear to deviate from the circular operative community elaborated by Vertov: those, for instance, who might look to something other than the dynamic divinity of the proletariat—or its mythographic incarnation in Lenin/ Christ—as the source of right, justice, or community.

To reiterate: in a way that is structurally similar to the caesura in *Man with a Movie Camera*, I have read the (dis)appearance of the veiled

woman that haunts *Three Songs of Lenin* as a cipher for the unworking of Vertov's project of "seeing without limits," an enigmatic blind spot in the dialectic of enlightened visibility, operative community, and secular humanization pursued by avant-garde Communist aesthetics.

In analyzing Vertov's encounter with the veiled woman, that undecided logic of the veil is worth considering here: on the one hand, it can work to seclude and restrict women to a private sphere, protecting the masculine public from carnal distractions. On the other, it can work as a screen to protect women from the potential violence of the possessive male gaze, especially in the colonial context. The visual disappearance into privacy instantiated by the veil can paradoxically enable the public appearance and spatial mobility of women in such a way as to escape harassment, abuse, and surveillance.²⁹ Without celebrating the veil as inherently a technique of resistance—though, when targeted by state authorities, it has often been recoded as such by indigenous populations—Mallek Alloula writes of the insecurity it effects in the colonial archive: "Thrust in the presence of a veiled woman, the photographer feels photographed; having himself as an object-to-be-seen, he loses initiative: *he is dispossessed of his own gaze.*"³⁰

The Permanence of the Theologico-Political

As suggested above, it is necessary to read Vertov's participation in the Soviet *hujum*, the campaign to unveil Muslim women begun in 1927, as it echoes other European colonial encounters with locally specific veiling practices, and the recurrent script described by Gayatri Spivak—"white men saving brown women from brown men"—that underwrote such encounters in Egypt, Algeria, and elsewhere.³¹ It also bears an important affinity with the ubiquitous iconography of women "throwing off the veil" in the aftermath of the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, which was narrated as the privileged route to the full humanization of these so-called faceless women by many Western commentators.

Vertov's positing of unveiling as the condition for an enlightened, operative community also finds an urgent contemporary resonance in Western Europe, where the veil has in recent years been constituted as a highly charged symbolic site in public debates surrounding the status of

immigrant Muslim communities and the secularist claims of the nation-states in which they reside. This partakes of the same secular fundamentalist conceit: that both civil society and the state are universal realms in which particularistic matters of theological concern—such as religiously articulated codes of feminine piety—can and should be suspended in favor of transparent public communication on the basis of an essential commonality of values. The public realm, in other words, is construed as a space of value neutrality, into which subjects are assumed to enter and participate on equal terms.³² Any articulation of difference that renders the experience of communication or community in that realm “uncomfortable,” in British MP Jack Straw’s words, is marked as a mortal obstacle to the operation of sociality itself, a sociality that is grounded theologically, as it were, in a transcendental economy of mutual visibility, specular recognition, and, ultimately, unmarked public appearance.

Without reducing the historical, geopolitical, and ideological difference separating Vertov’s quest to liberate the “surrogate proletariat” of Central Asia from the normative parameters of public visibility in contemporary Western Europe, these two episodes share a certain theologico-political repudiation of Islam that frames the latter as exemplifying the particularistic illusions and opacities of religion as such; for Vertov, following Marx, the task of historical materialism is “to unmask self-estrangement in its unholy forms once the holy form of human self-estrangement has been unmasked”; it is to reveal, in other words, the fact that “man makes religion, religion does not make man,” and that the religious ordering of sociality can be overthrown in favor of the universal self-consciousness of the proletariat.³³ In the predominant discourse on the veil in contemporary Europe, the task of secularism is not explicitly to liberate subjects from religious illusion but rather to prevent the latter from making undue incursions into the properly political sphere. Thus, religion is marked as a domain of private difference to be integrated, tolerated, and managed vis-à-vis the normative realm of the public. In both cases, however, Islamophobic repudiations have become the occasion for the often-violent resurfacing of the disavowed religious remainders subsisting in any social formation or image of the demos, whether it be Communist or liberal democratic—what Claude Lefort once called “the permanence of the theologico-political” in modernity.

Questioning Marxist and Kantian teleologies of secularization alike, Lefort asserts that “despite all the changes that have occurred, the

religious survives in the guise of new beliefs and new representations” and describes a paradoxical movement in which “any move toward immanence is also a move toward transcendence; any attempt to explain the contours of social relations implies an internalization of unity; that any attempt to define objective, impersonal entities implies a personification of those entities. . . . The workings of the mechanisms of incarnation ensure the imbrications of religion and politics, even in arenas where we thought we were dealing with purely religious or purely profane practices or representations.”³⁴ In Vertov, this movement takes the oxymoronic, hybrid form of an avant-gardist hagiography in which Lenin incarnates both the people and Christ—an artifact “located on the boundary between the human and the divine,” as Michelson put it, that the filmmaker himself insisted represented the formal and ideological culmination of the entire project of Kino-eye.

Rather than lament the irreducible proximity of the religious and the political, or simply accept the inevitability of their collapsing into one another in this or that hegemonic regime (whether covertly or explicitly), Lefort surprisingly locates a certain open-ended political challenge in the universal religious appeal to “the experience of a difference that is not at the disposal of human beings and that cannot be abolished therein; the experience of a difference that relates human beings to their humanity, [which means] that their humanity cannot be self-contained. . . . Every religion states in its own way that human society can only open itself to itself by being held in an opening it did not create.”³⁵ Lefort provocatively recodes the religious as that which, far from being “simply a product of human activity,” in fact exposes humanity to something irreducible, to “the illusion of pure self-immanence”—a risk of interiorization structurally associated with any incarnation of the demos whatsoever—thus rendering the contours, origins, and ends of humanity’s enigmas whose answer is constitutively unavailable to that humanity and thus perpetually exposed to indeterminacy and potential conflict vis-à-vis the inhuman.

The polemical spatiotemporal displacement I have attempted to perform in this reading is haunted by a set of questions that remain obtuse vis-à-vis the politics of secularism and multicultural community in contemporary Europe, or even the liberal imaginary of unveiling in Afghanistan. These questions pertain to the specific historical and political legacies of the Soviet reconquest of Central Asia, and specifically its

implications for subaltern women such as those whose indexical traces survive, enigmatically, in Vertov's film. Even as we join Ahmed Rashid in mourning the loss of political possibility during the Soviet reconquest of Central Asia, we cannot take for granted their potential emancipatory effects any more than we can those of the Bolsheviks—whose material advances for Muslim women in terms of health, literacy, education, and employment it would be irresponsible to underestimate. No simple nostalgia for political Islam in and of itself is viable, however heterogeneous or locally exotic it may have been in Central Asia.

As demonstrated by the meticulous archival research carried out by the historical anthropologist Douglas Northrop in his groundbreaking *Veiled Empire: Gender and Power in Stalinist Central Asia*, the *hujum* campaign of the thirties resulted in a highly contested recoding of *chavon* (the full-body *hijab* practice featured in *Three Songs of Lenin*) as an exemplary signifier of recently invented “national” traditions (Uzbek, Kazak, Turkmen, and so on) to be defended and attacked as such by Islamists and Bolsheviks respectively. Significantly, the Bolshevik reformers in question were not exclusively male or Russian—for better or worse, the *hujum* was often carried out with the collusion of educated female activists hailing from the Muslim regions in question. Though throughout the thirties such campaigns related tangentially to the horrific Stalinist policies of collectivization, they also coincided with the long-term improvement of Central Asian women's living conditions, at least according to the biopolitical indices of health, education, and employment, as well as a certain criteria of participation in the party, such as it was.

If, following Gayatri Spivak's critique of colonial discourse studies, we are not content to simply unveil Vertov's imperialist aesthetics of unveiling as an ethical end in and of itself, nor with relating the latter to the relatively Eurocentric problematic of postsecular rights claims on the part of discriminated metropolitan immigrant communities (a group that arguably has come to stand in for the subject-of-history for post-Marxist political theory), an additional imperative of reading would refocus our attention on the situation of women in the post-Communist conjuncture of contemporary Central Asia.

To take only the most disturbing representative of this conjuncture, post-Communist Uzbekistan has been presided over, since 1991, by the authoritarian secularist regime of the former KGB agent Islam Karimov,

which officially foreclosed what was a brief flowering of democratic ideological ferment in the postindependence period (including a neo-Jadidist movement). Rather than productively engage Islamic political elements, Karimov, invoking the specter of terrorism and receiving support from the United States, launched a campaign of suppression not only against militants but against all forms of political Islam, as well as secular reform movements.

This conjuncture came to a head in the spring of 2005, when twenty-five Uzbek businessmen accused of having ties with Islamic activists were swept up by the government and put on trial for endangering “the security of the nation”; over the course of the two-week trial, what began as a small vigil by the wives, relatives, and employees of the businessmen outside the courthouse became a daily protest encompassing thousands of Uzbek citizens demanding democratic reforms and the release of hundreds of others detained on suspicion of being Islamists. On May 25, Karimov declared a state of emergency that authorized the police to open fire on the increasingly agitated demonstrators, killing an estimated six hundred people, many of them women. Under pressure from human rights activists, the UK government publicly reprimanded Karimov, though it refrained from any further pressure; the United States, for its part, issued a tepid call for restraint to its partner in the War on Terror. Russia, China, and India—all of which are currently aiming to suppress Islamist unrest within their own borders in the name of national unity—lent their legitimacy to a sham international investigation of the event at the behest of Karimov.³⁶

Conclusion

Informed by theorists such as Rancière, Nancy, and Lefort, the rigorous probing of (in)operative political community put forward in *Communities of Sense* has proven crucial in taking art history beyond the avant-gardist paradigms of aesthetic autonomy, critical negativity, or collective immanence that in various combinations have informed the agenda of a journal such as *October* for the past thirty years—a legacy metonymized for me by the uncritical celebration of Vertov’s oeuvre by a scholar such as Michelson. Yet if this emergent impulse—with which my own text bears an obvious affinity—takes its own quasi-transcendental terms as

ends in themselves, it will remain hopelessly inadequate in confronting the forms of governmental impunity and international indifference (if not complicity) evident in an event such as the Andijan Massacre, which is one among the many (post)communist histories inscribed in the Vertov stills that have been under consideration here. The imperative that flows from this admonishment is that art historians situate their objects of study vis-à-vis an expanded field not only of oppressive visual cultures—those of early Soviet imperialism, for instance—but also the proactive technologies of witnessing developed by nongovernmental human rights activists over the past fifteen years. As exemplified by the production, brokering, and training activities of the organization Witness, such an imperative does not necessarily involve foregoing questions of form, poetics, and sense in the name of some kind of political immediacy; on the contrary, it is precisely because of the failures of the old axiom “mobilizing shame” and its positing of an automatic relay between visual revelation and ethico-political responsibility that aesthetic, rhetorical, and technical mediation becomes central to activist tactics. The point is not to dissolve the artistic realm—a move that has historically provoked all manner of reactive disciplinary posturing—but rather to expose it to a broader set of concerns, commitments, and communities in the hopes of redirecting its own rich histories and competencies from a “left melancholic” fixation on a mythic avant-garde to a renewed sense of cross-disciplinary humanities research that would track, across time and space, what Judith Butler has called “the emergence and vanishing of the human at the limits of what we can know, what we can hear, what we can see, and what we can sense.”³⁷

Notes

1. This essay originated in an invitation extended by the filmmakers Peggy Ahwesh and Keith Sanborn to several dozen writers in early 2003 to respond to the same single digital film-still from *Man with a Movie Camera*. I regret that an earlier version of this essay was not able to be included in the results of their project, *Vertov from Z to A*.

2. See Benjamin, “Konvoul N.” I refer to Rosalind Krauss’s and George Baker’s attempt to reclaim the film from its perceived abuse by Lev Manovich in his book *The Language of New Media*. Introducing a special issue of *October*

(Spring 2002) devoted to the critical potential of obsolescence (including that of *October* itself) in an era of alienating digitization, Krauss and Baker write,

It is thus with some interest that we witness the usage of a crucial avant-garde film such as Vertov's *Man With a Movie Camera* as the opening recent text in the "language of new media" just at it once served as the signal image some years ago for the very first issue of this journal. And it is also with some doubt that we listen to these same theoreticians of the new digital media proclaim that cinema and photography—with their indexical, archival properties—were merely preliminary steps on the path to their merging with the computer in the uber-archive of the database. Much of what is most important to cinema and photography is wiped away by such a teleology. And much of what seems most critical in contemporary artistic practice reacts to just such an erasure. ("Introduction," 4)

After the present essay went to press, *October* published a special issue devoted to new work on Vertov (Summer 2007). Malcolm Turvey frames the ambition of the issue as a critical complication of a certain "familiarity effect" among historians with respect to the status of Vertov's films as political-modernist classics ("Introduction"). While Turvey acknowledges that "none of this new work, so far at least, has overturned the political-modernist view of Vertov" (4), the scholarship collected in the issue is impressive in its close attention to archival materials and hitherto unaddressed facets of the filmmaker's oeuvre. The most significant of these revisionist essays in light of my own concern to defamiliarize this view of Vertov is Oksana Sarkisova's, "Across One Sixth of the World."

3. "The Third Meaning," 63.

4. *Ibid.*, 57.

5. My sense of what it means to read historically derives from Eduardo Cadava's discussion of Benjamin's notion of "dialectics at a standstill": "For Benjamin, there can be no history without the capacity to arrest or immobilize historical movement, to isolate the detail of an event from the continuum of history. . . . It short circuits, and thereby suspends, the temporal continuity between a past and present. This break from the present enables the rereading and rewriting of history, the performance of another mode of historical understanding, one that would be the suspension of both 'history' and 'understanding.'" *Words of Light*, 59.

6. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 16.

7. Cited in Michelson, "Introduction," xxvi.

8. Barnouw, *Documentary*, 63.

9. Cited in Michelson, "Introduction," liii.

10. Constance Penley discusses the centrality of *Man with a Movie Camera* for sixties avante-gardists Peter Gidal and Malcolm Le Grice's attempt at realiz-

ing “a filmic practice in which one watches oneself watching . . . filmic reflexivity is the presentation of consciousness to itself.” Penley points out that they disregarded any notion of the unconscious, lack, or desire, resulting in a masculinist conception of the political as the self-conscious construction of history. See “The Avant-Garde and Its Imaginary.”

11. Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, 7.

12. Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 2.

13. Buchloh, “From Faktura to Factography,” 94.

14. Michelson, “Introduction,” xxxvii.

15. See Cadava’s chapter “Caesura” in *Words of Light*, 59; and Andrzej Warminski’s discussion of the caesura in Holderlin: “Rather than allowing the human subject to recognize himself in his own other, the caesura rips him out of his own sphere of life, out of the center of his own inner life, and carries him off into another world and tears him into the eccentric world of the dead.” Cited in Keenan, *Fables of Responsibility*, 238.

16. Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, 19. Here it is important to acknowledge the work of Rosalyn Deutsche, who introduced Lefort into discussions of art and the public sphere in her *Evictions*.

17. Lefort, “The Image of the Body and Totalitarianism,” in *The Political Forms of Modern Society*, 305.

18. See Groys, *The Total Art of Stalin*. For a substantial critique of Groys’s teleology that demonstrates the latter’s affinity with Fukuyama’s post-Cold War “end of history” narrative, see Wood, “The Politics of the Avante-Garde”; Žižek, “Afterword: Lenin’s Choice.”

19. Michelson et al., *October*, iv. Incidentally, Žižek criticizes the journal in the following way: “Let’s talk as much as possible about the necessity of a radical change, to make sure that nothing will really change! The journal *October* is typical of this: when you ask one of the editors what the title refers to, they half-confidentially indicate that it is, of course, *that October* [the Eisenstein film]—in this way you can indulge in jargonistic analyses of modern art, with the secret assurance that you are somehow retaining a link with the radical revolutionary past” (“Afterword: Lenin’s Choice,” 172).

20. Cadava, “*Lapsus Imaginus*,” 36.

21. Vertov, “The Birth of Kino-Eye,” in *Kino-Eye*, 41.

22. Vertov, “My Latest Experiment,” in *Kino-Eye*, 137.

23. Rashid, *Jihad*.

24. Michelson, “Introduction,” and “The Kinetic Icon in the Work of Mourning.”

25. Cited in Michelson, “The Kinetic Icon in the Work of Mourning,” 18.

26. Repeating almost word by word the injunction from “The Birth of Kino-

Eye," this passage is from the 1934 journal entry "Kino-Pravda" in Vertov, *Kino-Eye*, 132.

27. Morris, "Theses on the Question of War"; Vertov, "My Latest Experiment," in *Kino-Eye*, 137.

28. Drawing upon and complicating Benjamin Buchloh's linear periodization of constructivism in "From Faktura to Factography," Mariano Prunes provides a convincing account of such formal and ideological hybridity in "Dziga Vertov's *Three Songs about Lenin*." Prunes explicitly aims to reintegrate the study of Vertov's cinematic production with the factographic activities of his colleagues such as Rodchenko, especially those related to the journal *USSR in Construction*, conceived as an instrument of mass enlightenment during the first Five Year Plan. While Prunes deserves credit for recovering the status of Vertov's film as an artistic, rather than merely propagandistic, artifact, he foregoes even the ambivalent crypto-political analysis given it by Michelson in her *October* article, celebrating it as an exemplary instantiation of avant-garde culture. Symptomatically, like Michelson, Prunes ignores the problems of gender and religion that Vertov himself enthusiastically announced as key motivations in his production of the film in the first place.

29. For a multifaceted account of veiling practices and their perpetually contested status, see the texts, images, artworks, and documents brought together in Bailey and Tawadros, *Veil*.

30. Alloula, *The Colonial Harem*, 182.

31. Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 235.

32. See Mouffe, "Religion, Liberal Democracy, and Citizenship."

33. Marx, "Introduction to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right," 244.

34. Lefort, "The Permanence of the Theologico-Political?" 187.

35. *Ibid.*, 157.

36. On the Andijan massacre and the international response, see Anora Mahmudova, "Uzbekistan's Growing Police State"; (May 27, 2005) <http://www.alternet.org/story/22097/> and the special report by Human Rights Watch, "Bullets Were Falling Like Rain."

37. Butler, *Precarious Life*, 151.

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Duke University Press Durham & London 2009

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