

RHYTHMIC MONTAGE IN THE FILMS OF DZIGA VERTOV: A POETIC USE OF THE LANGUAGE OF CINEMA

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"I work in the field of the poetic documentary film. That's why I feel so close to both the folk songs and the poetry of Majakovskij." (Dziga Vertov)

Among the masters of Soviet cinema of the 20's, Dziga Vertov played a very important role. During that decade he completed three long series of newsreels, *Kinonedelja*, *Kinopravda*, and *Goskinokalendar*, and some twenty feature films. His theoretical writings (especially his theory of the "cine-eye") as well as his films were avant-garde propositions, which had a long lasting and international influence.¹

Vertov's concept of montage is particularly close to certain ideas and techniques which flourished among the Cubo-Futurists and the Formalists, and later in the LEF group. Both in his writings and, implicitly, in his films, Vertov reiterated the fundamental principle that the artistic medium (in this case, the language of cinema) must be autonomous, self-referential and universal. The constant foregrounding in Vertov's films of the two basic structural elements of cinema — the shot and the montage — is analogous to the Futurists' foregrounding of the structural elements of verse — sound and rhythm. In a poem such as, "Dyr bul ščyl," by Alexander Kruchenykh, the destruction of the conventional semantic, syntactic, and prosodic elements liberates the words from every kind of causal relationships; they become unmotivated and are therefore perceived as autonomous values. The arrangement of the words in rhythmical segments and by phonetic analogies endows the text with a new and fresh meaning, based on parallelism. Similarly, Vertov in his films destroys both the conventional semantics of the shots (by means of unusual frame compositions and camera angles), and the conventional syntagmatic relationships that would advance a narrative (by means of a striking use of montage). The result is a palpable texture of visual analogies and rhythmic segments, homologous with the texture of a Futurist poem. The kinship between cinema and poetry was emphasized by Vertov when he noted in his diary, after having in vain waited to meet with Majakovskij: "I wanted to

tell him about my attempts to create a film poem in which montage phrases would rhyme one with the other.”²

The terms “montage phrases” and “rhyme” (when applied to a visual medium) are not immediately comprehensible, but they can be understood in terms of the Formalist studies on verse structure. By “montage phrases” Vertov meant something analogous to a line of verse, and “rhyme” is used here as an instance of the much broader feature of parallelism. It is from the circle of Opojaz that came the most insightful suggestions on the structural function of rhythm in poetry. Osip Brik observed that meaning in poetry does not simply derive from the syntactic arrangement of the sentence, as in prose discourse, but from the syntactic organization *plus* a rhythmic ordering of the verse line. The verse line becomes a semantic unit — which Brik calls the “rhythmico-syntactic unit.”³ For Tynjanov, syntactic and rhythmic ordering in poetry do not have the same status. Rhythmic fragmentation, which deforms and subordinates the syntactic ordering, is the dominant feature of verse. The rhythmic segments (the verse lines) form a repetition pattern which engenders associations in meaning. Therefore, the verse line is fully realized as a semantic unit when perceived in relation to other recurrent parallel lines.⁴ Parallelism is a feature inextricably connected with the concept of rhythm; it is, according to Jakobson, the fundamental principle of poetry. Not unlike Tynjanov, Jakobson sustains that “in poetry . . . any sequence of semantic units strives to build an equation.”⁵ This equation is perceived by the reader in terms of similarity and opposition, or better, of opposition within similarity. The rhythmic segmentation fosters an expectation of a subsequent similar segment; when the expectation is partly frustrated the variation stands out by opposition and is invested with a strong semantic stress. More recently, a similar idea has been reiterated by Jurij Lotman: “The rhythmicity of the verse is a cyclical repetition of different elements in identical positions, in order to . . . discover the similarity within contrast, or the repetition of similar elements, in order to . . . establish the difference within the similarity.”⁶

Vertov adapts the concept of rhythm, as the fundamental principle of verse structure, to his cinematographic poems. He works out what is known as “the theory of intervals.” He declares that the film has to be built “upon ‘intervals,’ that is, upon a movement between the pieces, the frames; upon the proportions of these pieces between themselves, upon the transitions from one visual impulse to the one following it.” He indicates that not less important than the movement between images is “the spectacular value of each distinct image in its relations to all the others engaged in the ‘montage battle.’” And concludes by saying that the ultimate task of a film editor is “to reduce these mutual attractions . . . these mutual repulsions of images among themselves . . . this whole multiplicity of intervals . . . to a simple spectacular equation . . . expressing in the best possible manner the essential theme of the cine-thing [film].”⁷

This theory was most successfully applied in *Man with a Movie Camera*. In this film the parallelism can be perceived in terms of the rhythm of a phrase — i.e. the alternation of shots of different duration in a sequence — and the visual rhyme — i.e. the analogy of images, frame composition, and

action. *Man with a Movie Camera* is enclosed in a narrative frame: it starts by showing the audience entering the movie theatre and ends by focussing on the public's reactions to the conclusion of the show. Within this frame, the film is divided into two symmetrical parts. They are both marked by a similar progressive intensification of the rhythm, a kind of crescendo that starts with shots of a rather long duration and ends with a series of shots no longer than a split second. In the first part, this movement accompanies the theme of sleep, gradual awakening, beginning of the activities — street traffic, factory work, trade — and progressive intensification of the activities, which reach a total frenzy by the end of the day. In the second part the slow-paced rhythm accompanies the theme of holiday, leisure and sport; it picks up speed in connection with a tavern scene and a concert of spoons and bottles, and ends up in a frenzied succession of barely perceivable shots. Two aspects of Soviet life have therefore been connected by the parallelism of two rhythmic segments, and semantic associations between the two have been forced upon the viewer's mind.

The transition between the two main phrases is a good example of how the rhythmic pattern subjugates the syntactic ordering. The last sequence of part I shows machinery, people operating the machinery, and city traffic, all moving at a terrific speed; the pace of the rhythm is gradually increased by means of shorter and shorter shots, fast motion and super-impositions, to the point where it reaches a climax and it is abruptly resolved. A total relaxation of the pace starts the next sequence: shots of a long duration and a static camera are matched by the images of still machinery, male workers washing in fresh water, female workers combing their hair, and a deserted landscape. The light suggests that it is the end of the day, we see tree tops and a rainbow-like metal bridge projected against an evening sky. The next shot shows a crowded beach in the daylight. Syntagmatically, the latter should be understood as the beginning of part II. In fact, while the end of the working day is still related by contiguity to the last sequence of part I, in space and time, the shot of the beach in the daylight suggests a break in spatial and temporal continuity. However, the syntagmatic ordering is deformed and overpowered by the rhythmic parallelism. The rhythmic pattern of the sequence presenting the end of the working day matches that of the opening sequence of part I; furthermore, several images — such as people washing themselves, trees in a deserted park, and the rainbow-like metal bridge — rhyme with analogous images at the beginning of part I, and a similar light effect (dawn/dusk) reinforces the rhyme. Therefore, by a semantic shift, we take the end of the day as the beginning of part II.

The two parts of the film are further connected by a series of visual rhymes. The following are only a few examples. A juxtaposition of two opposites occurs in part I and, with a variation, in part II. Two mannequins, one black in a white 18th century costume and wig, the other white in a black wig, appear in Part I. They are echoed in part II by a scene on the beach, where shots of a girl wearing a white kerchief and covering her face with dark mud are intercut by shots of a pale-faced, dark-haired lady making up her lips with dark lipstick. The use of posters to comment on the action constitutes another link between the two parts. In part I we see a

woman sleeping in bed, juxtaposed to the poster of a man's head, with a finger to his lips, inviting the public to be silent. The poster takes the whole frame (we do not see its edges), therefore it occupies the same filmic space as the other images, and we take it as part of the diegesis. This illusion is eventually destroyed when we see the same poster in a medium shot on a wall of a busy street with people walking back and forth in the foreground. A similar manipulation of filmic space occurs in Part II, where a poster, showing a woman's head with an empty glass close to her lips is juxtaposed to people drinking in a bar, and later it serves as a background for a row of beer bottles. A similar, but reversed, instance is represented by a series of close-ups of children. In part I, they appear in freeze frames manipulated by the editor of the film in the editing room, and are seen as passing through a moviola; in part II, the same close-ups of children are shown in their context as they watch the tricks of a magician, and therefore are a part of the diegesis. The parallelism of images, in this case as well as for the posters, besides generating possible semantic connections, has the function of "laying bare the device."

A parallelism in frame composition is provided by the random movements of the crowd on a busy street in part I, and the same random movements of the crowd on a beach in part II. This randomness of lines is opposed to the straight intersecting lines of streetcar tracks in part I, and the geometric design of rows of people in a physical education class in part II. We can see other examples of visual rhyme in the parallelism of actions. In part I, a rapid montage is used to create a metaphor for the "kino-eye," as Vertov called the lens. A sequence shows the camera lense that focuses on flowers, intercut with a woman's eyes focusing on a tree out of the window; the window is screened by venetian blinds that start blinking like a shutter. The crosscutting, back and forth, between the woman's eyes and the tree occurs several times at a very rapid pace. In part II, the same rapid crosscutting montage occurs in a shooting gallery, where a woman focuses on a target through the viewfinder of her rifle.

The examples discussed above show how the rhythm of a sequence and the visual rhymes create semantic connections between the two main parts. The same occurs on a smaller scale within each part. The first sequence of the film is a cataloguing of people and objects. A woman sleeping in her bed, bums sleeping on park benches, coach drivers sleeping on their coaches, infants sleeping in a maternity ward, are intercut with lifeless buildings on empty streets, store windows displaying motionless mannequins, a series of still objects such as an elevator, a typewriter, a telephone, a printing press, the wheel of an automobile and the wheels of factory machinery. These are all rather long shots, and all of approximately the same duration. The association people/machines is therefore generated not only by a visual analogy — stillness — but also by the rhythm of the sequence. This is reinforced by a subsequent sequence where the same (or similar) people and objects are shown in movement; the pace of the rhythm is more sustained, the shots are shorter, but still of equal duration. The analogy man/machine is, in this case, just an instance of a broader theme; actually, the main theme of the film, which stresses the harmonic coexistence and interaction of

human beings and technology in a constructivist world. The culmination of the analogy is the almost centaur-like nature of cameraman/camera.

An example of dissociation by rhythm occurs in the sequence of the sport events. A series of athletes performing in various sports — discus throw, high jump, pole vault, high hurdles, hammer throw, horse race — is shown in slow motion and with occasional freeze frames. These shots are intercut by shorter, regular speed shots of the public watching an event. The latter last approximately three seconds, versus the seven second length of the former. The stresses of this phrase fall on the shots of the athletes, because they are perceived as varying from the norm, both through the slow motion and their greater duration. An opposition between public and performers has thus been created: an opposition which becomes somewhat ironic when the sequence concludes with a fat lady (reminiscent of the ladies in the public) who rides a mechanical horse in a reducing salon.

Visual rhymes, which immediately follow one another are provided by cutting on shape. A woman, signing her divorce papers, is associated with another woman, mourning on a grave, by their identical posture. A cut on shape associates a traffic signal and the movie camera, both “watching” the life of the boulevard from a vantage point. An entire sequence built on cuts on shape juxtaposes a water reservoir to textile machines; the bubbling exuberance of a waterfall is duplicated in the next shot by the twirling of spools on a wheel, which rotates downwards; then the water smoothly flows over a rounded surface, and in the next shot two rotating cylinders on a machine echo that fluid shape and movement. What is important here is not the association of water and machinery as such, but their aesthetic parallelism. The impact of the sequence is purely aesthetic, almost an abstract symphony of fluid, everchanging shapes. The effect, futuristically, reveals “the beauty of the machine.”

Besides the cutting on shape, analogical juxtapositions are often based on action. It may be tinged with irony, as in the beauty salon sequence, where shots of a seemingly bourgeois lady, having her hair washed and trimmed and her hands manicured, are intercut with shots of women working at jobs requiring manual dexterity: a laundress washing clothes, a seamstress operating a sewing machine, and the editor of the film at the moviola. Another analogy based on action, but devoid of any irony is generated by the juxtaposition cameraman/worker. One sequence presents shots of the cameraman climbing a factory chimney to obtain a good camera angle, intercut with shots of workers operating machines. Another similar sequence shows the cameraman in a mine, and later at a steel plant; shots of him operating his camera are intercut with shots of miners and workers performing their jobs. This analogy sustains the idea that the cameraman is just another worker contributing to the needs of society.

The term “rhythmic montage,” in this article, is not used in the sense Eisenstein attributed to it. In “Methods of Montage,”⁸ Eisenstein discusses five kinds of montage, from the most simplistic, “metric montage” (which consists of splicing together segments of the film of a mathematically predetermined length, independently from the content of the text), to the most complex, “intellectual montage.” Stage 2 is represented by “rhythmic

montage,” according to which “the actual length does not coincide with the mathematically determined length of the piece according to a metric formula . . . [but] its practical length derives from the specifics of the piece, and from its planned length according to the structure of the sequence.”⁹ Eisenstein gives an example of “rhythmic montage” from his film, *Battleship Potemkin*:

The rhythmic drum of the soldiers' feet as they descend the steps violates all *metrical* demands. Unsynchronized with the beat of the cutting, this drumming comes in *off-beat* each time, and the shot itself is entirely different in its solution with each of these appearances. The final pull of tension is supplied by the transfer from the rhythm of the descending feet to another rhythm — a new kind of downward movement — the next intensity level of the same activity — the baby-carriage rolling down the steps. The carriage functions as a directly progressing accelerator of the advancing feet. The stepping descent passes into a rolling descent.¹⁰

In this essay, as in several others, Eisenstein was critical of Vertov, who, in his opinion, never went beyond a complex form of “metric montage.” Whatever reasons there might be behind the polemic between these two masters of the Soviet cinema, it is certain that there are structural differences between their films. Vertov did not use montage in the Eisensteinian way, either “metric” or “rhythmic,” but he edited his films in his own highly creative way. Far from following a mathematical principle in cutting his montage segments, he wove in each of his films a subtle net of semantic relationships by means of rhythmic patterning. The result of this kind of “rhythmic montage” is a meaningful whole, based on the same principles that sustain the creation of modern poetry.

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NOTES

¹See Seth R. Feldman, *Evolution of Style in the Early Work of Dziga Vertov* (New York: Arno Press, 1977); Dziga Vertov, *Stat'i, dnevniki, zamyсли* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo iskusstvo, 1966).

²Dziga Vertov, “The Writings of Dziga Vertov,” *Film Culture*, 25 (Summer 1962), 56.

³Osip M. Brik, “Contributions to the Study of Verse Language,” *Readings in Russian Poetics*, eds. L. Matejka and K. Pomorska (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971), pp. 117-125.

⁴See Jurij Tynjanov, *Problema stixotvornoga jazyka: stat'i* (Moscow: Sovetskij pisatel', 1965).

⁵Roman Jakobson, "Linguistics and Poetics," *The Structuralists from Marx to Levi-Strauss*, eds. Richard and Fernande DeGeorge (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1972), p. 111.

⁶Jurij Lotman, *Lekcii po struktural'noj poetike* (Providence, R.I.: Brown University Press, 1968), p. 65. See also, *Struktura xudožestvennogo teksta* (Providence, R.I.: Brown University Press, 1971).

⁷Dziga Vertov, p. 65.

⁸*Film Form*, ed., trans., Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949), pp. 72-83.

⁹*Ibid*, p. 74.

¹⁰*Ibid*, p. 74.