

II

Of the four film theorists whose work I am examining in the first two chapters of this book, visual skepticism probably exerted the most influence over Dziga Vertov. This is abundantly evident in his writings of the 1920s and 1930s, and it informs many of his major arguments as well as his filmmaking. Indeed, in Vertov's work, visual skepticism often takes the form of an outright contempt for the naked human eye.

Take, for example, Vertov's hostility to fiction film, which is a well-known feature of his theory and practice. Like other Soviets of his generation, Vertov believed that the cinema could potentially play a major role in the construction of a new, socialist society after the Bolshevik revolution of 1917. And, again like others, for him this role consisted of depicting social reality as theorized by Marxist-Leninism, as well as of generating enthusiasm for the new society being built upon this theory. But unlike most others, Vertov argued that fiction films, even the avant-garde fiction films of someone like Sergei Eisenstein, could not play this role. Cinema had to be nonfiction, or "nonplayed."

Vertov gives a number of reasons for his hostility to fiction film. For one thing, fiction or "played" films typically employ a written scenario or script in their production. They therefore violate two major tenets of Vertov's theory and practice. Like other classical film theorists, Vertov argues that the cinema as a medium should be independent of other media, in particular theater and literature. Only those formal and stylistic techniques unique to the cinema should be used by the filmmaker: "WE are cleansing *kinochestvo* of foreign matter—of music, literature, and theater; we seek our own rhythm, one lifted from nowhere else, and we find it in the movements of things."³⁴ The use of a written scenario in the production of fiction films constitutes for Vertov an intolerable intrusion by literature, a "foreign" medium, into the cinema. He therefore scathingly dismisses fiction films as "mere literary skeleton[s] covered with a film-skin."³⁵

The written scenario also violates the Constructivist tenet of a "culture of materials" to which Vertov adhered, a tenet which insists upon the role of the raw material of an art work in shaping its final form. This Constructivist tenet is summarized by El Lissitzky in a retrospective essay on Russian architecture written in 1929: "The second way of looking at the world, in terms of material, required not merely observation but also the tactile apprehension of things. The specific qualities of the respective materials served as a starting point for the development of the form."³⁶ Vertov, defining the raw material of the cinema as "the phenomena of life," argues that the filmmaker must proceed "from the material to the film-object."³⁷ The collection of the raw material for film objects during the act of filming, and the organization of this material in the editing room, cannot be predetermined. Instead, the form of a film has to grow out of the specific qualities of the raw material. This sequence of production, and the Constructivist tenet underpinning it, are by definition violated if the film object is predetermined by a written scenario before shooting, as it is in fiction filmmaking. Vertov also routinely appeals to the argument, later employed by

Bertolt Brecht, that works of fiction diminish or destroy an audience's capacity to think rationally because of the emotions they arouse: "Kino-drama clouds the eye and the brain with a sweet fog."³⁸

Just as important, but much less noted, an additional reason for Vertov's hostility to fiction film is his distrust of human sight. According to Vertov, a fundamental problem with fiction films, as with all film practices except his own, is that they "copy the work of our eye."³⁹

The death sentence passed in 1919 by the kinoks on all films, with no exceptions, holds for the present as well. The most scrupulous examination does not reveal a single film, a single artistic experiment, properly directed to the emancipation of the camera, which is reduced to a state of pitiable slavery, of subordination to the imperfections and the shortsightedness of the human eye.⁴⁰

In other words, so great is Vertov's distrust of human vision, and so intense his desire to depart from it, that it leads him to reject all film practices that he views as employing "the human eye as crib sheet."⁴¹

Like Epstein, Vertov believes that human sight is incapable of seeing reality as it really is. Unlike Epstein, it is the true nature of *social* reality, and not so much the *physical* universe, that the eye fails to see. Human eyes are too weak: "The weakness of the human eye is manifest."⁴² Only an instrument much more powerful than the eye can reveal social reality, and Vertov views the cinema as being this instrument. The cinema is "more perfect than the human eye"; it "perceives more and better."⁴³ It enables "the communist decoding of the world," the revelation of "the truth" about social reality "on the screen."⁴⁴ Hence, it is only with the invention of the cinema and its liberation from "the crib sheet of the human eye" that people can, for the first time, actually see social reality as it really is: "The eyes of children and adults, the educated as well as the uneducated, are opening, as it were, for the first time. Millions of workers . . . recovered their sight."⁴⁵

According to Vertov, human vision suffers from two fundamental limitations that prevent it from seeing the true nature of social reality, both of which the cinema overcomes. The first prevents people from fully seeing and understanding visual phenomena in general, not just social reality. For according to Vertov, our "perceptions" are disorganized and confusing. He gives as an example stage performances. "The spectator at a ballet follows, in confusion, now the combined group of dancers, now random individual figures, now someone's legs—a series of scattered perceptions, different for each spectator."⁴⁶ The cinema is able to overcome this limitation, "bring[ing] clarity into the worker's awareness of the phenomena concerning him and surrounding him,"⁴⁷ because of the precision with which editing can be used to organize visual phenomena recorded on film into harmonious patterns—based upon geometrical principles—that can be understood by the viewer.

Within the *chaos* of movements, running past, away, running into and colliding—the eye, all by itself, enters life.

A day of visual impressions has passed. How is one to construct the impressions of the day into an effective whole, a visual study? If one films everything the eye has seen, the result, of course, will be a *jumble*. If one skillfully edits what's been photographed, the result will be clearer. If one scraps bothersome waste, it will be better still. One obtains an organized memo of the ordinary eye's impressions.⁴⁸

Vertov calls the precise link, achieved on the editing table, between one visual phenomenon and the next "an interval," and he compares the harmonious pattern of intervals created by the editor to a musical phrase conceived of in classical terms.

Intervals (the transitions from one movement to another) are the material, the elements of the art of movement, and by no means the movements themselves. It is they (the intervals) which draw the movement to a kinetic resolution.

The organization of movement is the organization of its elements, or its intervals, into phrases.

In each phrase there is a rise, a high point, and a falling off (expressed in varying degrees) of movement.⁴⁹

Via the precision of editing, the editor can organize what is for the human eye a confusing array of perceptions into ordered, harmonious, and therefore intelligible patterns, overcoming the eye's limitation. To return to the ballet example:

The eye submits to the will of the camera and is directed by it to those successive points of the action that, most succinctly and vividly, bring the film phrase to the height or depth of resolution. . . .

A system of successive movements requires the filming of dancers . . . in the order of their actions, one after another . . . by forceful transfer of the viewer's eye to the successive details that must be seen.

The camera "carries" the film viewer's eyes from arms to legs, from legs to eyes and so on, in the most advantageous sequence, and organizes the details into an orderly montage study.⁵⁰

The second limitation that the human eye suffers from, according to Vertov, is that it is temporally and spatially immobile. It is confined to the present, and it moves through space slowly. The problem with this immobility is that the sort of phenomena that constitute social reality require much greater temporal and spatial mobility in order to be seen, as we shall see in chapter 2. In contrast, the cinema is "free of the limits of time and space," and Vertov repeatedly emphasizes its greater mobility in comparison to the eye: "The position of our bodies while observing or our perception of a certain number of features of a visual phenomenon in a given instant are by no means obligatory limitations for the camera."⁵¹ In terms of space, the cinema can "put together any given points in the universe, no matter where [it has] recorded them."⁵² And just as

it can traverse large expanses of space quickly (though camera movement) or instantaneously (through editing), so the cinema can move backward and forward in time. This can be achieved by way of editing: “The coffins of national heroes are lowered into the grave (shot in Astrakhan in 1918); the grave is filled in (Kronstadt, 1921); cannon salute (Petrograd, 1920); memorial service, hats are removed (Moscow, 1922).”⁵³ Or it can be achieved by fast, slow, and reverse motion: “[The camera] experiments, distending time, dissecting movement, or, in contrary fashion, absorbing time within itself, swallowing years, thus schematizing processes of long duration inaccessible to the normal eye.”⁵⁴ Because of its capacity to move rapidly through space and time, the cinema, Vertov asserts, allows for “the possibility of seeing without limits and distances.”⁵⁵

We have seen that Epstein’s distrust of human sight was the product of a number of influences: modern science, Bergson’s philosophy, and Romanticism. One source of Vertov’s visual skepticism is what the historian Richard Stites calls the “cult of the machine,” which was particularly influential in the Soviet Union in the 1920s, and idealized the machine as a model of perfection for both society and human beings.⁵⁶ Soviet visionaries and reformers of the 1920s, such as Platon Kerzhentsev and Alexei Gastev, envisaged the transformation of human beings into “new people,” more perfect because they were more machinelike. While working, these new people would overcome the imperfections of the natural rhythms and gestures of the human body by coordinating and controlling their movements with the precision and efficiency of a machine, ensuring maximum productivity and eliminating wastage of time and energy. Gastev’s popular poetry from the 1910s is particularly well known for the way in which it imagines the future as a mechanical utopia in which humans with “nerves of steel” and “muscles like iron rails” work with the precision and efficiency of machines.

While Vertov’s relation to the Soviet cult of the machine is, I have argued elsewhere, complex, the ideal of the machine as more perfect than the human body is clearly present in his film theory and practice.⁵⁷ In his 1922 manifesto “We,” for example, he argues:

The machine makes us ashamed of man’s inability to control himself, but what are we to do if electricity’s unerring ways are more exciting to us than the disorderly haste of active men and the corrupting inertia of passive ones?

Saws dancing at a sawmill convey to us a joy more intimate and intelligible than that on human dance floors.

For his inability to control his movements, WE temporarily exclude man as a subject for film.

Our path leads through the poetry of machines, from the bungling citizen to the perfect electric man. . . .

*The new man, free of unwieldiness and clumsiness, will have the light, precise movements of machines, and he will be the gratifying subject of our films.*⁵⁸

The prediction Vertov makes in the final sentence of this quotation comes true in the films he goes on to make after writing this manifesto. In *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), for example, there is a frenetic sequence that

interconnects shots of various types of labor. Close-up shots of film celluloid being spliced and edited are interspersed with close-up shots of typing, writing, a sewing machine, and a newspaper conveyer belt. Typically, only the workers' hands are present in these shots, moving swiftly and with precision, with occasional cuts to their faces as they stare intently down at their work. Within this fast-paced, exuberant sequence, there is a short series of shots of a woman folding cigarette boxes on a wooden block. This series begins with a close-up of a machine sorting and processing similar boxes (fig. 1.13). There is then a cut to a close-up of the woman's hands rapidly folding a box on the wooden stand (fig. 1.14), followed by a cut to her face as she stares downward at her work (fig. 1.15) and throws the completed box over her shoulder onto a pile. The film cuts back and forth between identical shots of the woman's hands and face about five or six times. It then returns to a shot of the box-sorting machine, followed by a final shot of the woman. The woman's movements are identical in each shot, much like the repetitious movements of a machine. And the cuts between her hands and face follow a regular rhythm, like a machine. Each shot of her hands pauses for roughly two seconds as she folds the box, and then the shot of her face as she discards it over her shoulder lasts a single, third second. This pattern is repeated five or six times and its pace accelerated. This worker is endowed with the mechanical rhythm of the box-sorting machine with which she works by the repeated pattern of the editing and by cuts back and forth between the woman and the machine. She is a perfect example of the "new people" envisaged by Gastev, someone who has overcome the imperfections of the human body by imitating the rhythm and movement of the machines around her.

It is this idealization of the machine as more perfect than the human body that constitutes one source of Vertov's hostility to human vision. For just as Vertov decries the "disorderly" movements of the human body in comparison to the "precise" movements of machines, so, as we have seen, he unfavorably compares the confusion of sight to the organized, harmonious, and therefore intelligible patterns of visual phenomena enabled by the machines of the

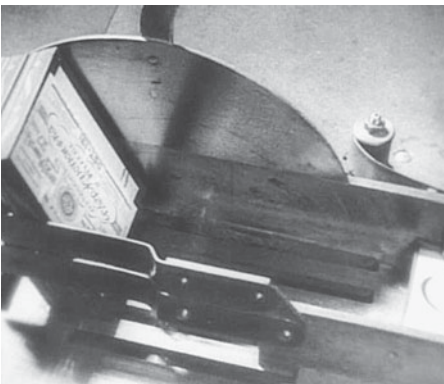


Figure 1.13. Sorting machine in *Man with a Movie Camera* (Dziga Vertov, 1929).

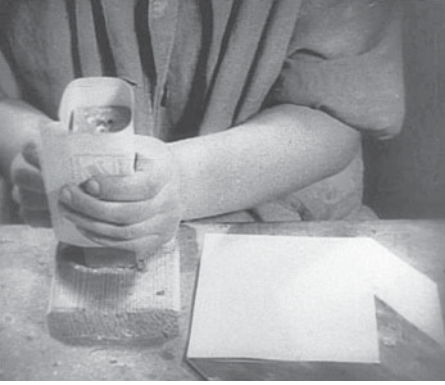


Figure 1.14. Worker's hands.



Figure 1.15. Worker's face.

cinema—the editing table and the movie camera. In other words, Vertov extends into the realm of perception the terms used by the Soviet cult of the machine to describe the superiority of the machine over the human body in the context of movement and labor—“precision,” “control,” the elimination of waste, and so on.

Vertov's idealization of the machine and his faith in modernization, technological progress, and science to some extent sets him apart from Epstein and his Romantic belief in the subconscious as superior to the conscious intellect, as well as from Balázs and Kracauer who, as we will discover, also owe a major debt to Romanticism. Yet, even though Vertov's rationalism makes him the most anti-Romantic of the film theorists in the revelationist tradition proper, he still shares with them the view that human sight is unreliable and the cinema is capable of revealing the true nature of reality by escaping the eye's limitations. His theory and practice might also share with Epstein's a theoretical source for his conception of these limitations, namely, Bergsonianism, which, as Hillary Fink has shown, exerted a major influence over Soviet artists in the 1920s.⁵⁹ This is perhaps why Gilles Deleuze argues that Vertov “realizes

the materialist programme of the first chapter of [Bergson's] *Matter and Memory* through the cinema."⁶⁰ By this, Deleuze seems to mean that Vertov's films depict social reality very much like physical reality as described by Bergson's metaphysics, a ceaselessly changing reality in which everything is constantly acting on everything else and is in turn acted on by everything else throughout time and space. As Deleuze puts it: "Whether there were machines, landscapes, buildings or men [being filmed] was of little consequence: each—even the most charming peasant woman or the most touching child—was presented as a material system in perpetual interaction."⁶¹ In Vertov's cinema, argues Deleuze, "everything is at the service of variation and interaction."⁶² His films are able to represent this ceaseless interaction because of the cinema's mobility, its capacity, through camera movement and editing, to move from "a point where an action begins to the limit of the reaction, as it fills the interval between the two, crossing the universe and beating in time to its intervals."⁶³ For Deleuze, following Bergson's theory of the limitations of human perception and echoing a central theme of this book, this capacity to reveal actions and reactions throughout space and time means that the cinema in Vertov's hands escapes its limitations and is therefore superhuman. "This is not a human eye—even an improved one. For, although the human eye can surmount some of its limitations with the help of contraptions and instruments, there is one which it cannot surmount, since it is its own condition of possibility."⁶⁴ This condition is, of course, immobility, because as we have seen, for Bergson "to perceive is to immobilize." Vertov's cinema, in Deleuze's view, reveals within the domain of social reality the surroundings that are of necessity subtracted when human perception cuts what it perceives out of reality: everything it interacts with throughout the universe spatially and temporally.

Whether or not one agrees with Deleuze's Bergsonian interpretation of Vertov's films (as John MacKay has astutely pointed out, this interpretation ignores the human contribution to editing that is explicitly represented in *Man with a Movie Camera* through the shots of Vertov's wife, Elizaveta Svilova, at the editing table editing the very film we are watching⁶⁵), in his writings Vertov clearly conceives of the naked eye as immobile in the sense that it is confined to the present and that it moves through space slowly. Human vision thereby fails to perceive the connections between things, an argument that strongly echoes Bergson's theory of the limitations of sight. Due to the precision of editing and its mobility, according to Vertov, the cinema is able to escape these perceptual limitations and reveal the true nature of social reality.

III

In *Theory of the Film* (1948), his third and last book of film theory, Béla Balázs argued that "The already once accomplished and then again lost achievements of the silent film are about to be revalued and restored."⁶⁶ As this claim implies, Balázs was very much a silent-film theorist. His film theory was largely predicated on cinema lacking synchronized sound, especially dialogue. When

3. Ibid., 240. With the coming of sound in the late 1920s, Epstein abandons his view that the cinema is, or should be, an exclusively visual art.
4. Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. N. M. Paul and W. S. Palmer (New York: Zone Books, 1988), 208.
5. Ibid.
6. Jean Epstein, “Photogénie and the Imponderable” (1935), in *French Film Theory and Criticism, A History/Anthology*, vol. II, 1929–1939, ed. Richard Abel (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 189.
7. Epstein, “Magnification,” 235.
8. Jean Epstein, “The Senses I (b)” (1921), in *French Film Theory*, vol. I, 244–45.
9. Epstein, “Photogénie and the Imponderable,” 190.
10. Ibid.
11. Jean Epstein, “On Certain Characteristics of *Photogénie*” (1924), in *French Film Theory*, vol. I, 317.
12. Jean Epstein, “The Cinema Continues” (1930), in *French Film Theory*, vol. II, 64.
13. Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: Free Press, 1967), 54.
14. Epstein, “The Senses,” 244.
15. Ibid.
16. Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 10.
17. Ibid., 33.
18. Ibid., 35–36.
19. Ibid., 36.
20. Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1998), 12 (emphasis in original).
21. Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 49.
22. Ibid., 30–31.
23. Ibid., 49.
24. Ibid., 36.
25. Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 306.
26. Ibid., xii.
27. Stuart Liebman, “Jean Epstein’s Early Film Theory, 1920–1922” (Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1980), 149.
28. William R. Paulson, *Enlightenment, Romanticism, and the Blind in France* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 150.
29. Epstein, “On Certain Characteristics of *Photogénie*,” 316–17.
30. Epstein, “For a New Avant-Garde” (1925), in Abel, *French Film Theory*, vol. I, 352.
31. Epstein, “Magnification,” 238.
32. Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, for example, include it in their list of Impressionist films in their *Film History: An Introduction* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2003), 89.
33. Richard Abel, *French Cinema: The First Wave, 1915–1929* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 471: “Although *Usher* seems to announce a break in Epstein’s aesthetic commitment, the effect of that break remains unarticulated.”
34. Dziga Vertov, “We: Variant of a Manifesto” (1922), in *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, ed. Annette Michelson, trans. Kevin O’Brien (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 7.

35. Dziga Vertov, "On the Significance of Nonacted Cinema" (1923), in *Kino-Eye*, 36.
36. El Lissitzky, "Russia: The Reconstruction of Architecture in the Soviet Union" (excerpt), in *The Tradition of Constructivism*, ed. Stephen Bann (New York: Da Capo Press, 1990), 142.
37. Dziga Vertov, "On the Film Known as *Kinoglaz*" (1923), in *Kino-Eye*, 35.
38. Dziga Vertov, "Artistic Drama and Kino-Eye" (1924), in *Kino-Eye*, 48.
39. Dziga Vertov, "Kinoks: A Revolution" (1923), in *Kino-Eye*, 16.
40. *Ibid.*, 14.
41. *Ibid.*, 19.
42. *Ibid.*, 16.
43. *Ibid.*, 15.
44. Dziga Vertov, "The Birth of Kino-Eye" (1924), in *Kino-Eye*, 42.
45. Dziga Vertov, "*Kinoglaz*" (1924), in *Kino-Eye*, 39.
46. Vertov, "Kinoks," 16.
47. Vertov, "Kino-Eye" (1926), in *Kino-Eye*, 73.
48. Vertov, "Kinoks," 18–19 (emphasis added).
49. Vertov, "We," 8–9 (emphasis in original).
50. Vertov, "Kinoks," 16.
51. *Ibid.*, 15, 18.
52. *Ibid.*, 18.
53. *Ibid.*, 17.
54. *Ibid.*, 19.
55. Vertov, "Birth of Kino-Eye," 41.
56. Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), chapter 7.
57. See Malcolm Turvey, "Can the Camera See? Mimesis in *Man with a Movie Camera*," *October* 89 (Summer 1999), 25–50.
58. Vertov, "We," 7–8 (emphasis in original).
59. Hillary Fink, *Bergson and Russian Modernism, 1900–1930* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999). I explore the possible influence of Bergson on Vertov in Turvey, "Vertov: Between the Organism and the Machine," *October* 121, "New Vertov Studies," ed. Malcolm Turvey and Annette Michelson (Summer 2007).
60. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (1983; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 81.
61. *Ibid.*, 39.
62. *Ibid.*, 80.
63. *Ibid.*, 40.
64. *Ibid.*, 81.
65. John McKay, "A Superhuman Eye," section 1 of "Disorganized Noise: *Enthusiasm* and the Ear of the Collective," 7 [online] January 2005. Available: <http://www.kinokultura.com/articles/enthusiasm-noise.pdf>. The fragile, even contradictory balance between human and machine in Vertov's theory and practice is discussed in Turvey, "Can the Camera See?"
66. Béla Balázs, *Theory of the Film (Character and Growth of a New Art)* (1948), trans. Edith Bone (New York: Arno Press, 1972), 39. (Hereafter cited in the text as TTF.) *Theory of the Film* was originally published in 1948 in Hungary as *Filmkultúra* and translated into English in 1952. According to Joseph Zsuffa, it is a "common misconception" that *Filmkultúra* is the same as *Iskusstvo Kino*, published in Russia in 1945 (Béla Balázs: *The Man and the Artist* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987],

DOUBTING VISION

Film and the Revelationist Tradition



MALCOLM TURVEY

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