

Dziga Vertov as Theorist

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Comrades, you have to know that we are thrusting "art" to the periphery of our consciousness.

—Vertov, 1925

Vertov's major theoretical essays span the period of his silent film career. In comparison to these early writings, the articles he wrote after 1930, at the outset of the Soviet sound cinema, are more journalistic and anecdotal. The most interesting articles of the earlier group are those which outline Vertov's method of "Film-Eye," his principle of "Film-Truth," and his concept of "Life-As-It-Is." Many of these anticipate the structure of Vertov's last and most controversial silent film, *The Man with the Movie Camera*, which retraces all of his theoretical concepts related to the documentary film, exemplifying his contention that the cinema can function as a truly international language of expression and communication.

As a revolutionary filmmaker and innovator, one who aspired to a vision of total unity between the new forms of art and the new society, Vertov believed that this link could be forged by the pursuit of actual events as found in everyday reality. He introduced his ideas in words—both written and spoken—and images—both silent and sound. For Vertov discussed the function of sound in cinema in several articles written before 1930; that is to say, prior to the release of *The Man with the Movie Camera*, which he had wanted to be the first Soviet sound film. Hence, in both their ideological meaning and their zealous defense of the unstaged cinema, Vertov's articles can be studied as theoretical analogues to his last silent film. I will support this thesis by quotations from the collection *Articles, Journals, Projects* by Dziga Vertov, published in Moscow in 1966, and due to appear next year in English translation from the University of California Press.¹

Observing and Revealing

The "Film-Eye" offers the opportunity of making the invisible—perceptible, the unclear—clear, the concealed—public, the acted—non-acted, and the false—true. (1924)

One has to begin with Vertov's crucial, but often misinterpreted method, "Film-Eye" [*Kinoglaz*]. Initially, he used this term as the title of a series of

newsreels. [*Kinokhronika*], the first of which was produced in 1926. In his 1925 article, "The Basis of 'Film-Eye,'" Vertov emphasized that this method implied deciphering "Life-As-It-Is" by the direct recording of facts found in real life; he also insisted that the "Film-Eye" had to act not through the medium of theater or literature, since he considered them "surrogates of life" [*surrogaty zhizny*],² but on its own terms. This bias stimulated Vertov's followers, *kinoks*,³ to become extremely antagonistic to theater, drama, and literature, as well as to "pay little attention to so-called 'Art,'" ⁴ In the same article, Vertov stated that his method was not concerned with the truthful recording of reality for its own sake. He insisted that authentic film material ("life facts") be reorganized into cinematic structures ("film-things"), a new unity with a particular ideological meaning. He repeatedly pointed out that the "deciphering" of life through cinema "must be done according to the Communist view of the world."⁵ Consequently, the "Film-Eye" method combined an aesthetic concept of documentary (unstaged) film with an ideological attitude toward art in general. Vertov made this very clear: "Our [*kinoks*'] task is to record life by recognizing, at the same time, the historical process. . . . We are interested not in the relationship 'art and reality,' but rather in 'reality and organization of reality.'" ⁶

A contradiction seems to exist in Vertov's demand that the *kinoks*, on the one hand, must record "Life-As-It-Is," without beautifying it, while on the other, they had to propagate the Communist world-view. Vertov believed that these two commitments did not exclude each other, because they reflected the dialectical process of the evolution of a socialist society. As a true Communist, Vertov claimed that a socialist artist must face reality *as it exists*, neither hiding from facts nor "masking" problems. The newsreel series *Film-Truth*, with which Vertov began his career, showed that the *kinoks* never hesitated to reveal the unpleasant aspects of contemporary life in the U.S.S.R. Vertov persistently confirmed such an approach toward reality in *The Man with the Movie Camera*, showing "the not-so-pretty side" of life in Kiev and Moscow (i.e., drunkards, bums, beggars, poorly dressed people, barefoot maids who still served well-dressed ladies, overcrowded trains, the difficult conditions of the life of mine workers, and cheap bourgeois films shown in workers' theaters) some eleven years after the October Revolution, at a time when the Soviet bureaucracy insisted that domestic artists recognize only embellished images of everyday reality.

Vertov argued that the filmmaker should organize life facts into new cinematic structures which would reflect his own ideology. This reorganization was to be multi-levelled and had to be perfected during the process of montage, as the final step of the "Film-Eye" method. The completed film would thus help the audience perceive reality as they otherwise would never be able to. By this method Vertov hoped to achieve an *active* seeing, not torpid observation. He considered the camera a weapon in the ideological battle. Assisted by the "Film-Eye," the proletariat could project the visage

of the new man, which would be “more perfect than Adam,”⁷ and anticipate the new international society which would represent “the world of freed workers, farmers, and [liberated] colonial slaves.”⁸ This was Vertov’s dialectical synthesis between recording life facts and presenting them on the screen in a new perspective. With this in mind, he launched the slogan according to which the movie camera must always be “on its socialist post.”⁹

Besides recording “Life-As-It-Is” and disseminating the Communist view of the world, the “Film-Eye” method contained yet another important principle. According to it, “all the people must continue to act and function in front of the camera just as they do in everyday life.”¹⁰ This strategy of shooting, which Vertov called “Life-Caught-Unawares” [*zhizn’ vrasplokh*], soon became a principle which has remained at the core of certain subsequent theories of documentary filmmaking. Most important, this principle states that a filmmaker must, from the very beginning, be concerned with the truthfulness of each shot. Regardless of its duration, the image on the screen must conform to an objective representation of an event filmed in reality, so that its ontological authenticity is fully preserved.¹¹ Thus, in *The Man with the Movie Camera*, the cameraman—Mikhail Kaufman—is seen shooting people at work, at various events, locations and sites, but not for one moment disturbing them. Vertov and Kaufman insisted that their camera “strive to shoot events ‘unnoticed’ and approach people in such a way that the cameraman’s work does not impede the work of others”;¹² and, conversely, not to hide when people react to the camera even if they express their dissatisfaction at being photographed.

Vertov emphasized that the strategy of shooting “unawares” had a definite ideological function: “Not ‘Film-Eye’ because of ‘Film-Eye,’ not shots ‘caught unawares’ for the sake of ‘shots caught unawares’—but for the sake of showing people on the screen without masks at the time when they do not play games, [and with the aim of] laying bare their thoughts by means of the movie camera.”¹³ From this it becomes evident that Vertov was extremely concerned with the ontological authenticity of each separate shot as the basis of the documentary film. The degree to which this principle was important for his method is illustrated by the fact that he used the phrase “Life-Caught-Unawares” as the subtitle of the first issue of the *Film-Eye* series. Through this series Vertov demonstrated the dialectical aspect of his method: although each shot in *Film-Eye* was filmed on location with real people undisturbed in their daily activities, the montage structure of many of its sequences was often in “conflict” with the logical course of the events that had occurred in reality. For example, in several sequences Vertov juxtaposed shots based on the concept of “Life-As-It-Is” [*Zhizn’ kak ona est’*]¹⁴—that is to say shots based on the ontological authenticity of the film image—with those shots which comprised a highly abstracted montage dynamism, or which were executed in slow, accelerated, or reverse motion.

Specifically, in *Film-Eye* (1926) there are two sequences whose action is presented on the screen in reverse: a piece of meat is followed back to a live steer, and a loaf of bread is traced back to wagonloads of wheat. Vertov labeled this cinematic device (i.e., reverse projection) the “negative of time,” making evident that his concept of how to construct a genuine “film-thing” in the documentary cinema was meant to be dialectical on the phenomenological as well as the structural level. In other words, “Truth” presented on the screen must be essential and not mechanical, ideologically functional rather than commercially entertaining.

It should be noted that Vertov distinguished between his strategy of “Life-Caught-Unawares” and another principle which required shooting the real events with a “hidden camera.” He described the distinction between these two options in a 1925 epigram reminiscent of Mayakovsky’s style of writing political statements:

“Film-Eye” and kiss—the hidden camera.

“Film-Eye” and fire—shooting unawares.

“Film-Eye” in a winter night—observation of the environment.¹⁴

These lines show that Vertov’s attitude toward reality was set forth from the beginning: to capture the essence of a kiss, the cameraman must be hidden so that the couple remain alone; to capture the suspense of a fire, the cameraman must shoot “unnoticed” in order that the people involved be undisturbed by his presence; to capture the atmosphere of a winter night, the cameraman must observe the natural setting and shoot only the most characteristic details. These three ways of applying the method of “Film-Eye” can be found in many of Vertov’s films. Particularly, *The Man with the Movie Camera* incorporates all three of these techniques in the way it shows people in the streets, public places, and at their jobs.

Another idea which guided Vertov’s filmmaking is derived from a principle he called “Film-Truth,” from which he adduced the idea of “defending the proletariat from the demoralizing influence of arty photoplays.”¹⁵ If we analyze what Vertov meant by “Film-Truth,” we find that his unique shooting strategy had two goals: to encourage the new concept of documentary filmmaking and to combat the old form of staged cinema. In his 1925 article, “‘Film-Truth’ and ‘Radio-Truth,’” he wrote: “With ‘Film-Truth’ and ‘Film-Eye’ we oppose the ‘artificial cinema’; and with ‘Radio-Truth’ and ‘Radio-Ear’ we oppose the ‘artificial radio program.’”¹⁶ In the final analysis, Vertov’s principle of “Film-Truth” was directed toward the future development of the documentary film, taking into account every possible technical improvement of shooting technology, including sync-sound, as he so brilliantly demonstrated it in his first sound documentary film, *Enthusiasm*.¹⁷

The strategy of “Film-Truth” makes use of the Constructivist concept of building a film in segments, i.e., from bits and pieces following an architec-

tonic approach to art. It is in this context that Vertov's principle of "Film-Truth" is related to montage:

"Film-Truth" is made up of material as a house is made of bricks. Using bricks, one can make an oven, the Kremlin wall, and many other things. From filmed material, one can construct various films. Just as one needs good bricks to make a solid house, so one needs good film material to organize a good film.¹⁸

The last sentence in the above quotation reveals Vertov's general montage theory to be not unlike those defined by Kuleshov and Pudovkin. Yet Vertov was much more radical in his insistence that from the very beginning of filming, the filmmaker must select details from reality, not merely shoot them at random, as Vertov's method is often wrongly described. His principle of "Film-Truth" therefore must be considered an integral part of his montage theory, along with his concept of "Life-As-It-Is." He stressed that one has to obtain "good film material" in order to make "a good film," and that one must decide ahead of time how to shoot details in reality ("life facts") so that they do not become "quasi-facts" on the screen. Without this selectivity, there can be no appropriate "organization" of a film, since "good film material" will be lacking; and the film's message, consequently, will be ineffective.

The idea that the main duty of the cameraman is to observe reality objectively and without interfering with it is once again discussed in Vertov's "Temporary Instruction" for the *kinoks*, outlining three ways of observing events and objects in life:

- (1) Observation of the place (e.g., the reading room, the cooperative);
- (2) Observation of moving characters or objects (e.g., your father, a pioneer, the mail truck, a streetcar);
- (3) Observation of the theme, independent of the thematic character or location (e.g., water and bread, father and son, cities and villages, tears and laughter).¹⁹

Evidently, the first type of observation is the most descriptive: it suggests the use of the camera as an observational recorder which tries to remain as impartial as possible in the given environment. Observation of the moving characters and objects implies the camera's physical participation in life's motion, thus enhancing the kinesthetic impact of a sequence. Some of the most exciting sequences in *The Man with the Movie Camera* are conceived on this principle: the "joggling" shots of the street filmed with the hand-held camera staggering along the pavement or following the soccer players. The third category of observation is related to the idea of parallel editing which compares two facts with the intention of leading the spectator toward an ideological conclusion. Examples of this can be found in every Vertov film.

Vertov's principle of "Film-Truth" is similar to Kuleshov's contention that "the essence of cinema lies in the compilation and alternation of filmed pieces . . . [because] for the organization of impressions, it is not important

what is shot for a given piece, but *how* one piece replaces another, and how they are structured.”²⁰ Yet, Vertov, unlike Kuleshov, never wished to apply the extreme Constructivist approach to cinema, regardless of the fact that he conceived many of his films “constructively.” While Kuleshov claimed that “one must search for the organizational principle of cinema not within the confines of the filmed shot but in the montage exchange of these shots,”²¹ Vertov always concentrated on what was shown “within the confines of the filmed shot”; i.e., he cared for the ontological authenticity of the film image, using montage to achieve the rhythmical and associative transition from one shot to another. The technical aspect of this kind of montage is best illustrated in *The Man with the Movie Camera*, showing the recurrent images of Svilova (Vertov’s wife and editor of the film) splicing together thousands of shots on her editing table. She does exactly what Vertov described—from miles of film strips, she culls the good pieces, those which will allow her “to organize a good film.” After classifying “the good film material” (arranged on the shelves above her editing table), she measures each shot and matches it with the others in various ways, building up the film’s structure as a mason does by laying stones and bricks to make a house or oven. Throughout the film, Vertov continuously points to the thematic classification of shots into groups and sub-groups (which Svilova separates in many boxes, each related to a topic). By showing this repeatedly, he gives the viewer an insight into the very process of making a film. In this context, *The Man with the Movie Camera* can be regarded as a self-referential structure which comments on the nature of the cinematic medium, as well as the act of building a film from the “bricks,” which are “life facts” selected and captured in reality, and later put together as “film-facts” in order to form a complete “film-thing.”

In reviewing all that Vertov wrote about his “Film-Eye” method, one discovers the ideological core upon which Vertov’s cinematic consciousness rests: it is Hegelian in essence and Marxist in form; it functions on a dialectical principle; and it is always aware of political momentum. In the article “The Birth of ‘Film-Eye,’ ” conceived in the style of Mayakovsky’s writing, Vertov says that his method embraces dialectically every possible cinematic device realizable by any shooting technique:

“Film-Eye” as film analysis.

“Film-Eye” as the “theory of intervals.”

“Film-Eye” as the theory of relationship among all the elements appearing on the screen.

We alternate the regular 16 frames per second along with rapid shooting and animation, or the hand-held moving camera, etc.

“Film-Eye” understood as “that which the human eye cannot see.”

“Film-Eye” as . . . microscope and telescope of time, the negative of time and an opportunity to see without limits and without distance,

tele-eye,

X-ray eye,

“Life-Caught-Unawares,” etc., etc. . . .²²

From the above quotation it is obvious that "Film-Eye" is a method of filmmaking to which all the shooting techniques and principles employed in a film must be subordinated. As one realizes, Vertov invented several new terms for specific techniques. Although he never systematically elaborated his theory, a thorough examination of Vertov's writings reveals a consistency in the use of terminology. Vertov enumerates the functions of "Film-Eye" with no desire to systematize them, yet, each separate device is very precisely described. The concept of an intrinsic relationship (in a Hegelian sense) among all the elements which appear on the screen seems crucial for Vertov; this suggests that his ultimate goal was a rhythmic and cinematic impact emerging from the integration of all the elements and devices incorporated in a film, among them slow and accelerated motion, reverse projection, animation, telescopic and microscopic shots, even shooting with remote control (as in live television coverage today), in short, all the cinematic equivalences for "Film-Eye."

Intervals of Vision

The main job of a film editor is to find the most appropriate "route" for the viewer to get through the interaction, juxtaposition and concatenation of movements created by the images on the screen. (1929)

As a consequence of his advocacy of a "montage way of seeing" [*montazhnoe vizhu*] transmitted to the viewer through the complexity of cinematic integration, Vertov developed in 1919, his "theory of intervals," and presented it as *the* way of producing a kinesthetic impact in viewers. Proceeding from the basic idea that the strongest "montage conflict" in a film always occurs at the moment when one movement is transformed into or juxtaposed with another—that is, *between* rather than *within* the shots—Vertov explained, in his first theoretical article, the "We" manifesto, that:

The intervals lead toward a kinesthetic resolution [of the filmed event] on the screen. The organization of movements is the organization of intervals in each phrase. Each phrase has its rise, peak, and decline. A film is, therefore, composed of phrases [shots] as each phrase is composed of intervals.²³

One immediately realizes that Vertov's idea of "intervals" derives from music, specifically from the contrapuntal theory of composing a musical phrase. Close scrutiny of the "Eye and Street" sequence in *The Man with the Movie Camera* shows that Vertov organized the interrelated sets of close-ups of blinking human eyes and shaking shots of streets as a composer would juxtapose two musical lines in order to create a counterpoint based on a purely metrical principle. Vertov and Svilova achieved this by systematically reducing shot length from longer "pieces" to one-frame shots, so that gradually the shots begin to function like musical phrases analogous to the "laddered" verse of the Futurist poets, which was meant to affect the reader not only contextually, but also on an auditory level.

It is important to keep in mind that Vertov considered the “theory of intervals” the power source of kinesthesia,²⁴ which provides a most exciting sensory-motor experience for the film viewer. Vertov emphasizes that film intervals must be related to the sequence’s content in order to contribute to the “intensification” of the “film-thing” which appears on the screen. Kinesthetic impact in cinema may be obtained by various means, including the juxtaposition of graphic forms dominating the static composition of the shot, the interaction of diverse movements occurring in two or more related shots, or a combination of both of these elements. In his films and essays, Eisenstein deals mostly with the graphic structure of the shot (the most typical example is the “Deity Sequence” in *October*), while Vertov emphasizes the tension created by the movements continuing or conflicting from one shot to another, combined with the camera movements. Some of the most cinematic sequences in Vertov’s films are edited on this principle. Vertov discovered that the kinesthetic value of the impulsive movement of the hand-held camera interrelated on the principle of “intervals” stimulates, more than anything else, sensory-motor experience in viewers. The unique kinesthetic power of the “Train and Wakening” sequence in *The Man with the Movie Camera* is created by the juxtaposition of the movements which occur within the shots of the speeding train and the motion of the head of the sleeping girl. The kinesthetic impact of this short sequence reveals the wakening mood in pure cinematic terms.

After completing *The Man with the Movie Camera*, Vertov wrote further on the “theory of intervals” in his 1929 lectures on “Film-Eye,” extending the concept of “intervals” to many other shooting devices. Following the Gestalt principle according to which the human eye perceives a new synthetic quality (and has different sensations) if the dynamic interaction among various movements is enhanced, Vertov came to the conclusion that the most important aspect of montage was “the kinesthetic transition from one visual impulse to the one which follows it.” In his famous lecture delivered in Paris, Vertov defined five options for the filmmaker to achieve kinesthetic impact via “intervals”:

“Film-Eye” builds “film-things” out of shots according to the “theory of intervals.” This theory is based on the perceptual relationship of one shot composition to another; on the transition and juxtaposition between visual impulses. This connection between the shots based on “intervals” is very complex, and consists of many interactions. Among the most important are: (1) the interaction of shot scales (close-up, medium-shot, etc.), (2) the interaction of angles, (3) the interaction of movements within the shots, (4) the interaction of light and dark, (5) the interaction of shooting speeds. Depending on these factors, the filmmaker decides: (a) the order and (b) the duration of each separate shot (in feet or frames). In addition to the relationship between any two shots (intervals) one must also consider the relationship of a single shot to all other shots; for, they all must be integrated into a “montage battle.”²⁵

The most important claim in this lecture is Vertov's contention that the "Film-Eye" method permits the "film-thing" to become more cinematic if built on "intervals," and that it was best illustrated in *Eleventh Year* and in *The Man with the Movie Camera*. The key sequences in *The Man with the Movie Camera* establish that Vertov achieved the strongest kinesthetic impact by editing shots on "intervals." Vertov's interest in the montage possibilities of using "intervals" increased near the end of the silent era, especially between 1927 and 1929, the period when he conceived and produced *The Man with the Movie Camera*. Hence, this film was and is the practical manifestation of his theoretical conviction.

To be objective, one has to admit that Eisenstein succeeded more than Vertov did in demonstrating practically his theoretical concepts. For both objective and subjective reasons Vertov left many of his theoretical definitions untested by his work. Probably some of them he himself found too abstract, needing revision in the process of creating; but others he simply could not fully explore due to the incredible resistance which Soviet official film theorists and producers exhibited towards Vertov's ideas and experiments. Yet, *The Man with the Movie Camera* remains the most avant-garde documentary film which epitomizes a filmmaker's theoretical views. As a whole, this film elaborates—in a purely cinematic manner—Vertov's concept of "film-thing," the concept which encapsulates his idea of dialectical unity between the concept of "Life-As-It-Is" and the specific cinematic devices used by the filmmaker who knows how to present reality on the screen with the "montage way of seeing." Vertov had come to this idea by 1923, in his article "On the Meaning of the Unstaged Cinema." Becoming aware of the contradiction between direct observation of reality and its cinematic transformation into "film-thing," Vertov wrote:

We, the "kinoks," describe "film-thing" as "the montage way of seeing."
 "Film-thing"—it is the conclusive result of a complete observation refined and deepened by means of all available optical devices, enhanced by the camera and the result of an experiment in space and time.
 Field of viewing—life.
 Material used for montage construction—life.
 Sets—life.
 Actors—life. . . .²⁶

The dialectical contradiction of Vertov's "Film-Eye" method was even more apparent in his insistence on filming people as they appear in everyday life, while at the same time creating a vision of the "new and perfect [Soviet] man" by means of the "montage way of seeing." As I have already said, Vertov wanted the screen image of man to be truthful to his prototype in reality on an ontological level, while the new vision of man (different from that existing in reality) had to be conceived on the structural level. Structural, in the Vertovian sense, meant a construct built by integrating "life

facts” with the way they are filmed, as he stated in his article about “Film-Truth” and “Radio-Truth”:

Every instant of life filmed without staging, every separate shot preserving in itself “Life-As-It-Is,” whether filmed by a hidden camera or by surprise, or any other similar shooting technique, appear on the screen in the form of a “film-fact.” A dog running along a street is to be perceived as a fact only when we do not force him to run and do not read what is written on his collar. An Eskimo remains an Eskimo on the screen even if it is not written on his head that he is Nanook.²⁷

It is obvious, from the above quote, that Vertov draws the distinction between “life facts” and “film-facts” on the ontological level in that a “film-fact” in the documentary cinema has no validity if it fails, per se, to preserve its truthfulness to the reality from which it comes. For this reason, he paid close attention to the act of observing reality before and during shooting. This process, which may be called “instant observation,” allowed the *kinoks* to perceive the essential aspects of reality and catch the momentous revelations of life “by surprise”; in fact, these are the most fascinating “facts” in Vertov’s films.

The main role of Vertovian observation is to penetrate the very core of the events in reality, and at the same time to approach reality bearing in mind the “film-thing,” to be constructed of many “film-facts.” The filmmaker/cameraman functions simultaneously as a recorder of life and constructor of a film—again, a dialectical symbiosis between the filmmaker, cameraman, and editor. Without consciously disturbing the natural course of events during the shooting, the filmmaker/cameraman/editor considers the various possibilities for restructuring visible events in the completed film. This is to say that one can edit a film in the proper cinematic way only if the available footage has been shot in a montage way, and on the principle of “Life-As-It-Is.” By preserving these two seemingly contradictory aspects of the film structure, the filmmaker/cameraman/editor may achieve the cinematic impact of the documentary film as opposed to the dramatic impact of the staged film.

Towards an Absolute Documentary Cinema

Instead of creating surrogates of life (theater, film-dramas, etc.) it is necessary to select, record and organize big as well as small “life facts” and make out of them true “film-things.” (1926)

Two of Vertov’s articles best illustrate his awareness of the necessity of linking theory and practice in documentary filmmaking. Both statements are related to *The Man with the Movie Camera*; the date of the first is March 19, 1928, while the precise date of the second—though obviously written in the beginning of the following year—remains unknown.²⁸ The titles of these statements are identical, “*The Man with the Movie Camera*”; however, the

second carried an additional subtitle, "An Absolute Cinematic Record and Radio-Eye,"²⁹ suggesting that Vertov originally wished to include sound in this film.³⁰ This likelihood remained visually intimated in the final version of the film: in the second part of *The Man with the Movie Camera* Vertov visualized "Radio-Truth" and "Radio-Ear," first by showing a workshop of radio amateurs in workers' clubs, and then by creating a montage sequence which conveys the rhythm of music produced by playing on various "instruments" (bottles, plates, spoons, pots, etc.) near the end of the film.

The two statements provide much information on the controversy which accompanied the making and distributing of Vertov's last silent film; they are also a brilliant summation of Vertov's entire theory of the documentary cinema. Although the first statement can be considered as a draft of the second, it contains several theoretical conclusions necessary for understanding both Vertov's film and his theory. The most significant is the contention that "the film is not merely a sum of visually recorded 'life facts' or a random collection of events, but a result of a 'higher mathematics' of cinematically perceived facts."³¹ Here again we witness Vertov's two-pronged theoretical attitude: his truthfulness to reality ("life facts") and his care for montage structure ("higher mathematics"). Another theoretical point made in the first statement is related to the question of cinematic integration as the crucial aspect of filmmaking. Vertov wrote that the main goal of his films was to achieve an intrinsic relationship between the recorded "life facts" and the cinematic devices; this integration had to be done in such a manner that the final message could be understood without intertitles. Vertov's idea of integration is best explicated in the following passage:

Integrated and unified with each other, the "life facts" are edited with a specific strategy. Its result contains, on the one hand, those montage concatenations identified with the viewer's perception of the real world; on the other hand, it groups the documents in such a way that their juxtaposition does not need the aid of intertitles. The goal of such a strategy is the total unification of all "life facts" and documents filmed in order to constitute—in their own way—an integrated and autonomous whole.³²

Here again we encounter Vertov's concern for Dialectical interaction between ontological authenticity of shots/documents ("identified with the viewer's perception of the real world"), and their cinematic connotation built by montage structure ("juxtaposition [of shots without] the aid of intertitles").

In addition, the first statement reconfirms Vertov's uncompromising bias against the theater, offering instead his vision of a "100% cinematic language" capable of conveying ideas without written commentary on the screen. This vision is, obviously, the ideal cinematic structure that "Film-Eye" could reach, as Vertov admits:

This experiment liberates cinema irrevocably from being a hostage of the theater

and literature. It forces the audience to confront itself with one-hundred percent film, and to accept the clash between "Life-As-It-Is" viewed from the point of the eye armed with the camera ("Film-Eye"), and "Life-As-It-Is" viewed from the point of the imperfect human eye.³³

Vertov's second statement is written in a style completely different from that of his previous theoretical articles. From a stylistic viewpoint, it is a poetical essay conceived in the manner of Mayakovsky's Futurist manifestoes: its language is agitated in proclaiming the idea of a new international language of communication. Vertov intended to distribute the second statement to the audience before the first screening of *The Man with the Movie Camera* so that the viewers would know the scope and aim of the experiment. The statement is divided into two parts, each of which is subdivided into eight "chapters," concluding with an "apotheosis." The first chapter explains the theoretical concept on which the film was based. The importance of this paragraph can be judged by the fact that Vertov included it as the introductory text following the credits of *The Man with the Movie Camera*. It reads as follows:

A FRAGMENT FROM THE DIARY OF A CAMERAMAN

A Note to the viewer:

This film is, in itself
AN EXPERIMENT
It is a film-communicator
OF VISIBLE EVENTS

A film

Without the help of written titles (film without intertitles)

Without the help of screenplay (film without script)

Without the help of theater (film without sets, actors, etc.)

This experimental work is made with the intention of constructing a genuine international and absolutely visual language of cinema, on the basis of its total separation from the language of theater and literature.

The structure of the sentences in the second statement is, in many ways, reminiscent of Vertov's early proclamations, "We—A Variant of the Manifesto" and "Kinoks. Revolution," written in 1922–23. After the introductory "chapter," we are informed about the "state of the art" prevailing in conventional film production and about the "stale methods" of shooting still practiced in the Soviet film studios of the period. In contrast to these methods, Vertov proposes a completely different kind of filmmaking, one which is conceptually and ideologically incompatible with the "staged cinema." As his final note, Vertov emphasizes that his film will not hide the fact that what the audience sees on the screen comes from a celluloid strip carefully processed in a laboratory and edited on an editing table, to show "The transformation of the film stock from the movie camera through the laboratory and editing to the screen . . ." ³⁴

Camera as Weapon

The film camera must participate in the decisive fight that goes on between the Soviet society and the bourgeois world; it has to stand on the Socialist position.
(1929)

The most illuminating aspects of Vertov's method described in the second statement summarize his innovative ideas about the documentary cinema. I have compiled his ideas in a way which points to the substance of "Film-Eye":

- (1) The "unarmed" human eye (the eye without the aid of the camera) is incapable of orienting itself in the "visual chaos of life"; it must be assisted by "Film-Eye," which forms a symbiosis between the human eye and the camera objective.
- (2) The cameraman does not possess any supernatural power; he is "an ordinary man" who knows how to use a mechanical tool which helps him "veer" in the "boisterous ocean of life."
- (3) The cameraman should avoid shooting "life facts" with a stationary camera; instead, he must be ready to move through reality as if in "a canoe lost in a stormy sea"; this contributes greater kinesthetic impact to the "film-thing" projected on the screen.
- (4) The cameraman does not need a "pre-written scheme" (a script), nor has he to follow any preconceived idea about life; he does not attune himself to the "director's instructions," and the "schedule made up by a scriptwriter"; he has his own view of life and personal vision of the future film.
- (5) "Speed" and "dexterity" are the most important skills of the cameraman's profession; he must "keep up with the pace of life's events," in order to maintain the genuine rhythm of the events shown on the screen as a "film-thing."
- (6) The cameraman uses many specific cinematic devices to "attack" reality with his camera and to put facts together in a new structure; these devices help him to strive for a better world with more perceptive people.
- (7) The cameraman should photograph persons with the intention of remaining "unnoticed"; he is expected not to bother people at their work just as he would expect them not to disturb him during shooting.
- (8) The cameraman must be everywhere and "observe" everything in order to obtain various choices before he decides when to shoot and what to face with his camera; only then will he be able to "keep pace with everyday life."
- (9) Knowing that "in life nothing is accidental," the cameraman is expected to grasp dialectical relationships between disparate events occurring in reality; his duty is to unveil the intrinsic conflict of life's antagonistic forces and to lay bare "the cause and effect" of life's phenomena.
- (10) At the same time, the cameraman is not an impartial observer of reality; he actively immerses himself in life's struggle, and once a part of it, he realizes that in life "everything has its own reason," which has to become manifest in the film.
- (11) The cameraman must always take the "progressive side" of life; he is expected to support and espouse the "revolutionary attitude" toward reality, which will contribute to building "a true socialist society."
- (12) All this is necessary if *kinoks* want to show on the screen "Life-As-It-Is" in

its essence, including the “life” of the film itself—the process of cinematic creation from shooting and laboratory, through editing, up to the final product, i.e. the film being projected to the audience in the movie auditorium.

These twelve “commandments” Vertov gave to his *kinoks* in the form of a theoretical statement conjunctive to his last silent film; together they represent the most radical concept of the documentary cinema in both the silent and sound era. Uncompromising to the extreme, concerned exclusively with this medium as a means of unique cinematic expression and ideological communication, pointing to the complexity of the cinematic structure and its dialectical relationship to “life facts” and artifacts, Vertov’s second statement remains a significant revolutionary document in the history of cinema. At the same time, it discloses the difficulties *kinoks* faced in promoting and realizing their concepts of the “unstaged” film.

In practice, Vertov had to fight for his theories with great sacrifices and by accepting many unpleasant consequences. To the end of his career, Vertov stood firm for the experimental, nontraditional concept of the documentary cinema, in spite of the official attacks on his theoretical views. Unlike many other filmmakers, including Eisenstein, who made concessions to the Party demands, Vertov persistently held to his view about the documentary cinema. Already in 1923, faced with criticism of his “method” as being “too difficult” for the masses, Vertov confirmed his avant-garde credo:

One of the chief accusations levelled at our method is that we [*kinoks*] are not understood by the masses. Well, even if you accept the fact that some of our works are difficult to understand, does it mean that we are not supposed to create any serious work? That we must abandon all exploration in cinema? If the masses need light agitational and polemical pamphlets, does it mean that the masses do not also need serious essays by Engels and Lenin? What if a Lenin of the Soviet cinema appears among us, and you do not permit him to work, because the products of his creation are too innovative and difficult to understand . . .³⁵

This passage speaks for itself and explains why Vertov did not further elaborate many of his theoretical statements which appear extremely original though insufficiently developed. I am sure that in the future someone will continue Vertov’s revolutionary vision of the documentary film as a means to help us perceive reality in a way that reveals the inner aspect of the “life facts,” the aspect we cannot see with our natural eyes.

NOTES

1. Dziga Vertov, *Stat’i, dnevniki, zamysly* (Articles, Journals, Projects), ed. S. V. Drobashenko (Moscow: Iskustvo, 1966).

2. Vertov, “Osnovnoe kinoglaza” (The Basis of ‘Film-Eye’), 1925, *Stat’i*, pp. 81–82.

3. *Kinok* (plural *kinoki*) is the term constructed by Vertov to distinguish his followers. In Russian, *kino* means cinema; thus *kinok* implies the person who belongs

and is devoted to this medium. Among the *kinoks* were: Ivan Belyakov, cameraman; Pyotr Zotov, cameraman and editor; Mikhail Kaufman, cameraman, editor and director; Ilya Kopalin, cameraman and editor; Yelizaveta Svilova, editor and Vertov's wife.

4. Vertov, "Osnovnoe kinoglaza," *Stat'i*, p. 82.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Vertov, "Khudozhestvennaya drama i 'kinoglaz' " (Artistic Drama and "Film-Eye"), 1924, *Stat'i*, p. 80.
7. Vertov, "Kinoki, Perevorot" (*Kinoks*, Revolution), 1923, *Stat'i*, p. 55.
8. Vertov, "Chelovek s kinoapparatom—Zritel'naya simfoniya" (*The Man with the Movie Camera—A Visual Symphony*), 1929, *Stat'i*, p. 280.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Vertov, "O fil' me 'Kinoglaz' " (About the Film *Film-Eye*), 1923, *Stat'i*, p. 68.
11. *Ontological authenticity*, or *onto-authenticity*, is the term which implies the illusionistic as well as factual denotation of motion picture photography, giving the viewer a strong feeling that the objects and events actually existed as such at the time when the image was exposed. By its very nature (i.e., ontology), the motion picture projected on the big screen makes the viewer believe that the events occur "for real." This impression is particularly relevant for the documentary film and for those fictional genres which emphasize realism of the film image, like Italian neo-realism, or French *cinéma-vérité*. In the Soviet Union, the term ontological authenticity was first defined by Esther (Esfir) Shub as the result of her experience in compiling films made exclusively from authentic newsreel footage (e.g., *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty*, 1927, and *The Russia of Nicholas II and Lev Tolstoi*, 1928). Shub influenced both Vertov and Eisenstein, but she also admittedly learned from their work, claiming that she was "in the final instance, Vertov's pupil."
12. Vertov, "Zritel'naya simfoniya," *Stat'i*, p. 279.
13. Vertov, "Rozhdenie kinoglaza" (The Birth of "Film-Eye"), 1924, *Stat'i*, p. 75.
14. Drobashenko, "Introduction," *Stat'i*, p. 18. The quotation is taken from an unpublished article in Vertov's Archive.
15. Vertov, "O kinopravde" (On "Film-Truth"), 1924, *Stat'i*, p. 77.
16. Vertov, "'Kinopravda' i 'Radiopravda' " ("Film-Truth" and "Radio-Truth"), 1925, *Stat'i*, p. 86.
17. Vertov's application of the "Film-Truth" principle to sound cinema is a topic for separate consideration, discussed by Lucy Fischer in her article "Enthusiasm: From Kino-Eye to Radio-Eye," *Film Quarterly*, XXXI (Winter 1978), pp. 25–34.
18. Vertov, "O kinopravde," *Stat'i*, p. 78.
19. Vertov, "Vremennaya instruktsiya kruzhkam 'kinoglaza' " (Temporary Instruction for the Group of "Film-Eye"), 1926, *Stat'i*, p. 95.
20. Lev Kuleshov, "Amerikanshchina" (Americanitis), *Kino-fot*, No. 1, January 1922, pp. 14–15. English translation in *Kuleshov on Film*, trans. Ronald Levaco (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), pp. 127–130.
21. *Ibid.*
22. Vertov, "Rozhdenie kinoglaza," *Stat'i*, p. 75.
23. Vertov, "My—variant manifesta" (We—A Variant of the Manifesto), 1922, *Stat'i*, p. 48. Vertov emphasized that the "theory of intervals" was first delineated by *kinoks* in 1919, when the "We" manifesto was initially written, but was not published until 1922.
24. Kinesthesia is a term which connotes the specific sensation that the motion picture can stimulate in the viewer's perceptual centers by means of montage, camera movement, motion within the shot, and the exchange of light and dark impulses on the screen. Affected by these stimuli, together with the strong feeling of spatial

identification with the world presented on the screen, the viewer's sensory-motor centers respond as if his body were actually moving through space. The viewer's muscular response to the movement occurring on the screen can be even more intensified by the wide-screen image, deep focus, 3-D, and stereophonic sound, thus proving that cinematic experience is essentially different from what we experience by watching television. The most elaborate definition of kinesthesia was given by Slavko Vorkapich in his lectures, "Film as a Visual Language and as a Form of Art," published in *Film Culture*, New York, No. 38, Fall 1965.

25. Vertov, "Ot 'kinoglaza' do 'radioglaza'" (From "Film-Eye" to "Radio-Eye"), 1929, *Stat'i*, p. 114. See also *Film Culture Reader*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: Praeger, 1970), pp. 374-75, and *Film Makers on Film Making*, ed. Harry Geduld (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967), pp. 104-5. The English translation (by Samuel Brody), which does not fully correspond to the Russian original, first appeared in the short-lived periodical *Film-front*, No. 3, New York, 1935.

26. Vertov, "O znachenii neigrovoi kinematografii" (On the Meaning of the Unstaged Cinema), 1923, *Stat'i*, p. 71.

27. Vertov, "'Kinopravda' i 'Radiopravda,'" *Stat'i*, p. 87.

28. The first statement was published for the first time in the 1966 anthology of Vertov's articles edited by S. V. Drobashenko.

29. The second statement appeared initially in the Ukrainian language, in a little known Khrakovian journal, *New Generation* (January, 1922). The additional subtitle, "An Absolute Cinematic Record and Radio-Eye" (Absolutnii kinopis i radio-oko), is subsequently changed in the Russian version of the same text to "A Visual Symphony." Since the original manuscript does not exist, it is not certain whether the latter subtitle was invented by Vertov or by a translator or editor. S.V. Drobashenko informed me of his conviction that the new subtitle was by Vertov himself.

30. This idea has been more recently verified by Vertov's wife, Yelizaveta Svilova, the editor of *The Man with the Movie Camera*. See Seth Feldman, *Evolution of Style in the Early Works of Dziga Vertov* (New York: Arno Press, 1977), p. 166. Feldman conducted an interview with Svilova on March 1, 1974, in Stockholm.

31. Vertov, "Chelovek s kinoapparatom" (*The Man with the Movie Camera*), 1928, *Stat'i*, p. 109.

32. *Ibid.*

33. *Ibid.*

34. Vertov, "Zritel'naya simfoniya," *Stat'i*, p. 280.

35. "O znachenii neigrovoi kinematografii," *Stat'i*, p. 71.