

Dziga Vertov
From “The Laboratory of Hearing” to “Enthusiasm”
Sound in early nonfiction film

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Dziga Vertov - From “The Laboratory of Hearing” to “Enthusiasm”. Sound in early nonfiction film.

Dziga Vertov is widely regarded as a master and pioneer in early documentary filmmaking. His films have been scrutinized and studied around the world and stand for their innovation both in technical advancements and theoretical content.

Perhaps lesser known are his pioneering experiments with sound in the early part of the 20th century, subsequently explored throughout his filmmaking career which informed many of his documentary films.

It is the relationship between sound and image in Vertov's work which this essay intends to explore, beginning with his sound poems in “The Laboratory of Hearing”, on to “Man with a movie camera” (1929) and ultimately “Enthusiasm: The Symphony of the Donbas” (1930), Vertov's audio visual masterpiece. I will also touch upon the relation between Vertov's early sound works and the Futurist ideals of the early 20th century, focusing on Luigi Russolo's “Art of Noises” manifesto, and how such relationship may have subsequently influenced his film practice.

Sound Poems and “The Laboratory of Hearing”

From an early age Vertov studied piano and violin at the Conservatory of Bialystok before moving to St Petersburg where he engaged in the fields of medicine and psychology. There he also delved into writing and was known in the St Petersburg bohemian circles as a Futurist poet. (Grant, Sloniowski, 1998, p.41)

With the aid of a phonograph, a recent invention credited to Thomas Edison, Vertov created “The Laboratory of Hearing”, an experimental audio workshop where he manipulated audio by layering recorded sounds. In the existing recreations of these early experiments (“From the sound of a cascade” and “From the sound of a sawmill”, 1916), we can hear Vertov's preoccupation with a departure from the conventional musical canons, adopting a much more experimental approach to sound and music, which was very much in line with Marinetti's and Russolo's Futurist ideals. In an 1935 interview, Vertov recalled:

“I had the original idea of the need to enlarge our ability to organize sound; to listen not only to singing or violins - the usual repertoire of gramophone disks - but also to transcend the limits of ordinary music.” (Vertov in Alarcon, 2008, p.25)

It is believed that Luigi Russolo's “Art of Noises” (1913), a Futurist manifesto, had a considerable influence on the elaboration of his “Laboratory of Hearing”. (Wedgewood,1983) Russolo's proposal of “replacing the limited variety of timbres of orchestral instruments by the infinite variety of timbres of noises obtained through special mechanisms” (Russolo, 1913) clearly resonated in Vertov's sound and poetic endeavours. According to such ideals, the modern man needed to break free from the tired pastoral scenarios of the 19th century and embrace the new exciting sounds of a mechanized word. Through “The Laboratory of Hearing”,

Vertov pioneered the use of sound as an artistic object, which was to be recorded and manipulated at will. The advent of the phonograph brought forward the idea that sound was no longer an ephemeral phenomena, but something which could be stored, physically transported and artistically manipulated in a variety of ways and for a multitude of purposes. Vertov was not only already aware of it, but on the forefront of an artform which he would further develop and, as we will see, later masterfully integrate into his film practice.

It is perhaps also important to mention that Vertov's approach to sound predated Pierre Schaeffer's *musique concrète* by more than two decades. The acousmatic experience of a disembodied sound in a musical format, advocated by Schaeffer in the 1940's, had already been employed by Vertov and other soviet *avant-gardists* in the beginning of the century.

Silent Film and Sound imagery

Such premature involvement with sound was not entirely discontinued when in 1917, Vertov joined the Cinema Committee in Moscow. There he developed a theoretical film practice to which he called Kino-eye; the exploration of real-life through the camera objective, opposed to the colourful portraits of life in fiction film. Nevertheless, silent film did not prevent Vertov from further developing his sound ideas, and the ripples of these early sound experiments "appear, time and time again, in "eruptions" of musical montage, as rhythmical word themes, or in the form of a "song without words", as a visual projection of a poetical idea, as an announcement in the realm of Radio-Glaz." (Tode, Wurm, 2006, p.139)

In Vertov's own words:

"In "One Sixth of the World" the titles were already replaced by a word-radio-theme in contrapuntal construction. The "Eleventh Year" was constructed as a film-object of sight and sound, edited to be heard as well as seen. The "Man with the movie Camera" is constructed in the same manner, moving from the kino-eye to the radio-eye." (Vertov in Michelson, 1984, p.91)

"Man with a movie camera" (1929), undoubtedly one of the filmmakers most widely recognized and revered works, presents many of Vertov's ideas and aesthetics, relaying the truth of daily life on screen. A silent film by the technological constraints of the time, "the films cutting to the tempo of all manner of loud machines and human activities makes this one one of the noisiest silent films ever made." (Grant, Sloniowski, 1998, p.43) The film continuously portrays urban settings in a skillful montage which at times seems to depict imagery with sound connotations, as if Vertov wishes to convey sound through visual analogies.

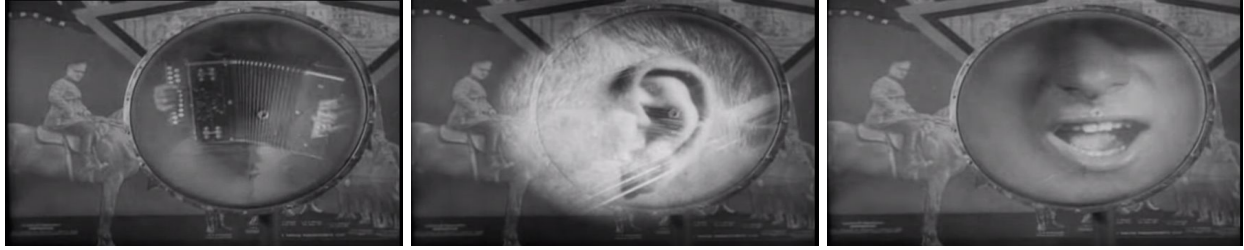


Figure 1.1 - Sequence of stills taken from "Man with a Movie Camera"

As can be seen in *fig.1*, the use of such imagery immediately draws the spectator to the realm of sound. The image of an accordion, juxtaposed onto the speaker of a gramophone, indicates music is now being played. A human ear appears, as to say: Listen!; followed by a man which speaks or sings, conveying the idea of dialogue and aural communication.

In yet another curious scene which takes place in the last section of the film (Figure 1.2), Vertov juxtaposes several images, individually portraying instruments being played and sounds being created from metal spoons. Using the same montage principles he used in "The Laboratory of Hearing", Vertov is composing a visual musical scenario.



Figure 1.2 - Still taken from "Man with a Movie Camera"

This type of sonic imagery is very much present throughout the film, creating a sonic illusion which exist solely in the imaginarium of every single spectator. Drawn from memory, these imaginary sounds are experienced individually and not as an audience as a whole, adding yet another layer to Vertov's work, one that perhaps derives from his psychology background.

Whilst talking about the organization of “The Eleventh Year”, Vertov “described how visual images of machines which make various noises create imaginary sound crescendos and how they contrast dramatically with images which suggest absolute silence.” (Wedgewood, 1983) This denotes a real effort in Vertov to ensure these visual metaphors were infused with deeper meaning, creating imaginary relationships between image and sound.

One should also be aware that the common practice of the time was for most film projections to be accompanied by a live orchestra, normally following the visual content, which may ultimately override a positive outcome for this type of imagery. Notwithstanding, the use of such powerful visuals was very much intentional and intended to give the idea that the film should be “heard as well as seen.”

Several soundtracks have since been created for “Man with a Movie Camera”, from purely orchestral to electronic, to a mix of both. Thus far, and drawing judgement from the filmmakers aesthetics at the time, I cannot help but to praise Pierre Henry’s effort. This pioneer of *musique concrète*, which as I have mentioned, Vertov anticipated, presented the piece at *Théâtre de la Ville à Paris* in 1993 and as it stands, is the existing soundtrack which more closely reflects Vertov’s futuristic ideas.

“Enthusiasm: The Symphony of the Donbas”

Marinetti’s and Russolo’s Futurist movement, along with the Second Viennese School of classical music (spearheaded by composer Arnold Schoenberg), provided a musical-historical context to Vertov’s “Enthusiasm” (1930), and were the two major disruptive influences to the *status quo* throughout Europe. Advocating a severance from the tired musical forms of the past, and an absolute need to adopt new aesthetics which would better represent modern society, both schools of thought were determined to rewrite the long established musical canons. The Russian *avant-garde*, lead by composers such as Arseny Avraamov (Symphony of Sirens, 1922) and Alexander Mossolov (Symphony of Machines - Still Foundry, 1926-28) were pretty much engaged in, if not pioneering, such experimentation, providing Vertov with the much needed backdrop to further develop his audio-visual ideas.

“Enthusiasm” takes place in the Donbas region of Ukraine, then a part of the Soviet Union, and was Vertov’s first attempt to unify both audio and visual mediums. The film itself presents a powerful symbiosis of striking imagery and sound, depicting the evolution of a Five-Year-Plan, intended to provide the Soviet Union with cold mined in the region.

The lack of existing sound recording technology which would have enabled Vertov to capture the real everyday sounds of industrial progress proved to be the biggest challenge for the films realisation. Up until that point, sound was predominantly being created in a studio setting, mostly used in fiction films. In order to overcome such adversity Vertov was to “commission the construction of the World’s first-ever mobile “sound recording station”, believing the microphone should be able also to “walk” and “run””. (Alarcón, 2008, p.45)

One of the biggest achievements of the film was the successful use of location sound, something which was deemed “impossible by many of his contemporaries”. (Hicks, 2007, p.72) By capturing the Industrial soundscape of the Donbass, Vertov was able create a soundtrack

which embraces the noise-sound elements of the mechanized world, a visionary endeavour for the time which still sounds relevant today.



Figure 2.1 - Sequence of stills taken from "Enthusiasm: Symphony of the Donbas"

"A clock ticking. Quietly at first. Gradually louder. Louder still. Unbearably loud (almost like the blows of a hammer). Gradually softer, to a neutral, clearly audible level. Like a heart beating, only considerably stronger.

Footsteps approaching, climbing a staircase. They pass. The sound dies away. A clock is ticking. Again approaching footsteps. They come close. Stop. The clock ticks, like the beating of a heart." (Vertov in Michelson, 1984, p.289)

Even more striking is the fact that prior to have written the plan for the film, Vertov had already described in detail his intentions for the soundtrack in an extensive treatment where the opposing themes of the film are clearly stated. The sound of church bells, representing the church and the pursuit of the divine, opposed to the sounds of machinery, factory whistles and iron hammers as the sign of progress and triumphant socialist ideals, both underlined by the sound of a ticking clock representing the passage of time within the Five Year Plan. Such sound treatment emphasizes the importance of sound in his work, and an already apparent theoretical approach to it.

The interaction between sound and image in "Enthusiasm" jumps from a state of synchronicity to non-synchronicity throughout; from a diegetic to a non-diegetic relationship which accentuates different resolutions.

In the initial stages of the film, Vertov depicts the reminiscences of the Tsarist society by showing scenes of devotion and drunken behaviour, sporadically accompanied by the sound of church bells and human cries of an unknown source, ultimately portraying a society in decay. The sound of several ticking clocks can also be heard at times as to signify an impending change. Vertov clearly constructs this idea by having the scene illustrated in *Figure 2* fade away to the sound of a cuckoo clock synchronously.

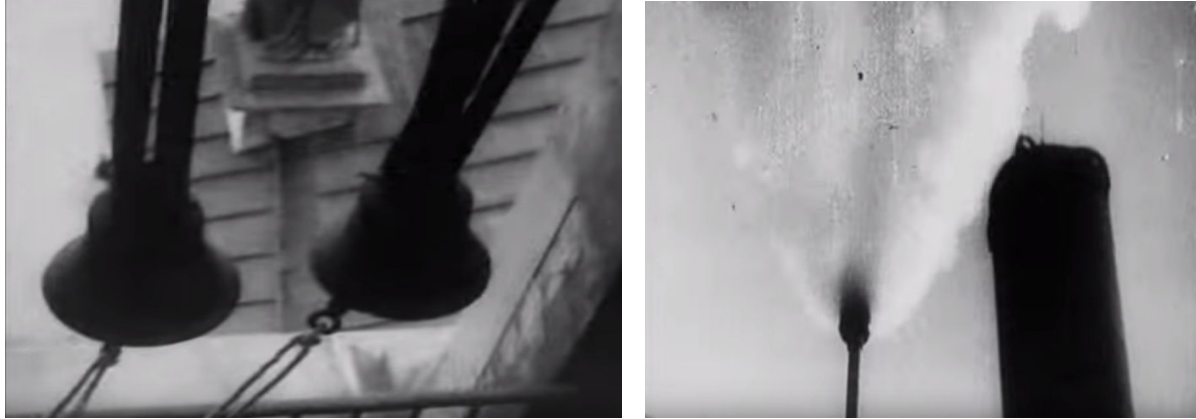


Figure 2.2 - Stills taken from “Enthusiasm: Symphony of the Donbas”

Perhaps the most impressive use of sound happens during the second act of the film (around minute 22), where the audio manipulation of factory sirens constructs a musical drone which is endowed with meaning. Vertov replaces the sound of church bells and religious devotion, prevalent in the previous section of the film, with the elongated sound of the industrial call to work. The sound of factory sirens fills the role of the church bells maintaining the same meaning, that of a call to devotion, presenting work as the new religion, and the factory as the new church. (Fig.2.2) Moreover, the dronish elongated sounds of the sirens transmit a sense of continuity, of presence and a negation of silence, reinforcing the idea of a new type of communion, one which would take place not in the silence of a church setting, but through the noise of mechanical sounds.

By investing on image and sound the same importance and meaning, Vertov accomplished what he had envisioned throughout his career, that of achieving a “complex interaction of sound and image” (Vertov in Michelson, 1984, p.111) Charlie Chaplin, a leading figure at the time, acknowledged Vertov’s efforts after viewing “Enthusiasm” during its London premiere:

“Never had I known that these mechanical sounds could be arranged to sound so beautiful. I regarded it as one of the most exhilarating symphonies I have heard. Mr. Dziga Vertov is a musician. The professors should learn from him not quarrel with him. Congratulations. (Charlie Chaplin in Tode, Wurm, 2006, p.142)

I believe there is still much more to be said on Vertov’s audio-visual montages. Why is his audio work not as widely known as his visual counterpart is something which can perhaps be attributed to the advent of the Cold War, anti-communist misinformation and the inaccessibility to Soviet archives. Vertov pioneered a multitude of visual practices which influenced a plenitude of filmmakers to this day. Nevertheless, his audio work requires conceivably more attention which will perhaps bring forth a wider picture of his tremendous contribution to the field.

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