

Dziga Vertov: The Idiot

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I made up my mind to be honest, and steadfast in accomplishing my task. Perhaps I shall meet with troubles and many disappointments, but I have made up my mind to be polite and sincere to everyone; more cannot be asked of me. People may consider me a child if they like. I am often called an idiot, and at one time I certainly was so ill that I was nearly as bad as an idiot; but I am not an idiot now. How can I possibly be so when I know myself that I am considered one?

– Dostoyevsky’s Prince Myshkin (1)

Is it possible that I too am acting out a role? The role of seeker after film-truth? Do I truly seek truth? Perhaps this too is a mask? Which I myself don’t realize...?

– Dziga Vertov, 1937 (2)



Dziga Vertov

By 1927, the already embattled Dziga Vertov is practically washed up in Moscow. He travels to take an exile’s job at the Ukrainian Film and Photography Administration (VUFKU) studios. In that atmosphere of relative freedom, he – along with his muse and wife, co-director and editor, Svilova – produces *Odinnadstatyy* (*The Eleventh Year*, 1928), *Chelovek e kino-apparatom* (*Man with a Movie Camera*, 1929) and his first sound film, *Entuziazm: Simfoniya Donbassa* (*Enthusiasm*, 1931). He already knows in his heart that he’s losing the war against the swill he calls cine-vodka, the narrative-driven entertainment-fictions so popular with the working-class public. But he is not yet the baffled, broken man of the 1940s. He has work to do and he believes that a decisive, poetic work made of pieces of “life caught red-handed” may reverse the tide not only of the history of cinema, but of Soviet Reality itself.

He is wrong. He is cinema’s most beautiful loser.

Before this moment, he has been a Vladimir Mayakovsky-worshipping poet, a musician and sonic experimentalist, a dilettante Futurist, a committed leather-jacketed revolutionary on the Agit-Trains, the father and mother of Soviet “documentary”, and a gifted theoretician and polemicist. In the Ukraine, he becomes a film artist of the first rank – and perhaps something even more frightening.

One can, without much anxiety, send off Leni Riefenstahl as a worker in kitsch. But it’s not quite so easy with Vertov. He is a good test case for the idea that art does NOT exactly save you. Vertov was BOTH a genius and a *willing* creature and subject of a totalitarian ideology. Whatever he was, Vertov never was *that* ambivalent about the price to be paid in blood and skulls for world socialism. And the Ukraine bore more than its fair share of the

price: factory slave labour, brutal collectivisation and the terror famine. By any rational standard, his *Donbass Symphony* (the alternate title of *Enthusiasm*) should be an infamous film. If I were Ukrainian, I would burn the negative and sprinkle the ashes with holy water. The reason we worry about Riefenstahl's *Triumph des Willens* (*Triumph of the Will*, 1935) and not *Enthusiasm* is weird: pretty images. Fools find "beautiful" images more threatening than the homely image-facts of kino-pravda.

After returning from glory abroad with his *Man with a Movie Camera*, Vertov undertook a suicidal double challenge – to make a political film that would both show (with image and montage) and song (with sound taken from nature and machine) the heroic, dramatic struggles of the state to industrialize at any cost – while pioneering the use of untested sound recording in the field. The finished film, *Enthusiasm*, was received with derision and incomprehension.

The War of Soviet Montage

We can picture early montage theory as a dysfunctional *troika*, that particularly Russian horse-rig with a shaft horse in the centre and two animals apparently pulling hard to either side. In the centre, under the painted harness arch of the *duga*, is Lev Kuleshov; on one side is the romantic-idealist-symbolist Sergei Eisenstein, and on the other is the archmaterialist and modernist Vertov.

Kuleshov in his lab had theorized two discoveries that he had found in D. W. Griffith. The first was that the organization of bits of film in a certain manner created a cinematic geography that was persuasive and emotive – the birth of filmic space. And, building on this theorization of filmic space, he also noted something peculiar about the "grammar" of film: that its character as a temporal experience was ontologically prior to its content. Practically, this meant that (as the common gloss goes) context determined meaning in the cinema's sur-realist scheme. This second item we now call the Kuleshov effect. The Kuleshov effect, as eventually raised to sublime heights by the surrealists, is nothing less than a call to anarchy. Kuleshov's subtle paradox was this: the less the middle term in a montage signifies or expresses "in itself", the more it "means" in the juxtaposition of montage – a radical destabilization both of reality and what we ordinarily consider as meaning. Years later, Robert Bresson would take this simple idea and raise it to the level of an aesthetic. And Kuleshov's own films reflected a strong obsession with the power of banal, trite, even kitsch, images and forms.

Kuleshov insisted on the audience's radical freedom to participate in the "making" of the film. The "effect" that he gives his name to exposes another paradox of film: the objective and concrete (the machine seeing and recording impassively) becomes subjective and ambiguous (through audience perception) in the montage of the film.

Both authoritarian artists by nature, Eisenstein and Vertov were reacting ideologically to the dangerous anarchism that Kuleshov had mined: their theorizing had to somehow recover and stabilize the "scientific" meaning of the image. They both downplayed the mere joining (linkage) of bits of film. Raising montage to an eternal principle of mind, history and only accidentally of art, Eisenstein is smashing ideographic shots together like a conceptual physicist, generating new idea-particles from the collision.

Eisenstein, in his interesting revision of montage theory, *Montage in 1938*, came to think that there was nothing unique to film in the montage principle: that humans were likely to impute causality and relation to any two phenomena placed in accidental conjunction, even in nature. He gives the example of a "female human" found "weeping" by a "grave", which denotes the new additive concept "widow" for an observer. Eisenstein decided to correct his

early zeal for montage by going Bazinian and developing his baroque later style of montage-in-the-frame. He could better control the precision of the viewer's reception by staging his montage collision inside the frame.

Eisenstein wanted to replace KINO-EYE (mere "additive" or "brick" montage) with KINO-FIST (collision-synthesis "multiplicative" montage) in his polemics against Vertov and Kuleshov. This required a distortion of Vertov's use of montage – which included all prior and contemporary uses of montage but in a radically different theoretical conception of the "meaning" and function of montage – which Eisenstein either didn't understand or wilfully misunderstood – which resulted in laying Vertov bare to charges of incomprehensibility or dread formalism.

Vertov, in opposition to Eisenstein, takes the dynamic space BETWEEN shots, the interval, for the true power of the image in film, striving for a mean between the "inherent" integrity and time sense of the image, and the artistic force of what Vertov, proceeding from the musical analogy, called the interval. Vertov also insisted on the modernist mode of film montage, beholden neither to Literature or Theatre:

Montage means organizing film fragments (shots) into a film object. It means writing something cinematic with the recorded shots. It DOES NOT mean selecting the fragments for scenes (the theatrical bias) or for titles (the literary bias). (3)

Vertov was primarily interested in two things:

1. The tension between the ontological integrity of the shot, and the created integrity and rhythm of the whole piece; and
2. The gaps between the shots which, properly handled, yielded a beautiful pattern of variation – a tactility – a new sonically inspired aesthetic that was represented by Vertov's borrowed term "interval theory".

But the coming of sound offered a further challenge for the Marxist-scientific value of the image. Another dimension of the Kuleshov effect was revealed, as the magic of cinema showed, that sound could profoundly alter and colour the meaning of a particular image. The first half of the 1930s found everybody experimenting with non-synchronous sound in montage. But something strange began to happen: the irresistible force of sound slowly destroyed not only the montage style of film, it reversed the unspoken hierarchy of the early cinema. The visible gave way to the invisible. Images became the servants of their attendant sounds and particularly of the logical assertion of the word. The *acousmetre* became the supreme dictator of documentary film.

As Bill Nichols explains:

Collage became flattened upon the Procrustean bed of expository logic, in which images serve primarily as illustration for the rhetorical claims of a spoken commentary with its problem-solving bent rather than allowing the potential of images as assembled fragments to attain full force. Collage, sound, and documentary became tamed, placed at the service of sponsors. The sponsors could vary radically in their politics and ambitions (from Stalinism to the New Deal), but their impact everywhere was both to give to documentary a dominant form at the same time as they robbed it of more complex diversity and potential subversiveness. (4)

Enthusiasm is a borderline film that is not yet in full capitulation to the word.

The Poetic Structure of *Enthusiasm*

Vertov's Æsthetic:

1. A camera with no fixed reference point. Denial of a secure POV for the audience. Complete mobility of the camera/eye.
2. Repetition and Variation for the sake of kinetic/æsthetic pleasure.
3. Each shifting angle gives a new contextually based vision of an object.

Formal Tropes of *Enthusiasm*:

1. Vertovian Parades of Humans (Masses)
2. Synchronous Group Activity (Exercises)
3. Machine-like Human Behaviour (Repetitions)
4. Transports – Linking Shots – Trains, Coal Cars, Wagons
5. Reactions of Human Faces – Listening, Speaking, Watching.

The film opens with some of Vertov's trademark reflexivity: a young woman, fresh clean, pure, the very image of the new man, sits under a bizarre installation, a bacchic grove with a propeller hanging from the tree, and listens to a radio on a pair of headphones. She is ordered to tune in to hear a piece of music, "The Last Sunday", by the composer Nikolai Timofeyev from the film *The Donbass Symphony*. Vertov then cuts to Timofeyev conducting the recording of the same piece of music, gesturing in real time to the music as we hear it.



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Then Vertov cuts from her to the old man of bourgeois society: aged, decrepit, shuffling, broken, bowing foolishly before icons and the crucified Christ. The wretched old people kiss the feet of the image. Drunks wallow in filth, tilting bottles of transparent poison skyward. A cascade of tsarist and religious images ... but wait, there is a bell tolling somewhere for that old world. This is the realm of the impure.

The masses are doing their peculiar thing: they are massing. The church bells ring more frantically than ever, so frantically that there is a doppler shift in the sound: the bells de-tune, bend and wail. Choral music gives way to the faint human wailing known as prayer. Yes, ladies and gentlemen, religion is the opium, vodka, poison and cinema of the masses.

There is a cleansing shriek of a steam whistle – framed, of course, by the wires of the electric god.

A band of young pioneers marches in the town square. The image is in long-shot, but we hear the sound in "close-up" – a classic Vertovian transformation of reality, because Vertov was not after the truth, as the clumsy translation of *kino-pravda* into *cinéma vérité* suggests. Vertov's *pravda* is a sur-realist construct. Not "truth" but film-truth. Using the real as raw material for a new world. A camera lends us an experience without a mind – an experience we could not have in reality, because it is not filtered through a consciousness.

Its automatism is its strength. Vertov wanted to manufacture the memories of a mechanical eye and ear, which in turn, at the editor's behest, would construct the new socialist reality, using *découpage* to break the world apart to materialize it on film: perfection, efficiency. Vertov's idea is not objectivity, but mechanical subjectivity, the camera more specific, more obstinate, more Marxist-scientific.

Drones of Metal Machine Music enter the sound montage for the first time. Tones and percussion. Revolutionary marches play – chopped by the bleak tolling of the incessant church bells. But with each cut, the structures of the past are crumbling, melting, falling into themselves. The masses arrive at the church. We learn that "the Pope is chained to Capital's moneybag" and a carnival grotesque of a Metropolitan holds us up with a revolver like the cowboy in *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), while on the soundtrack we hear the chanting voice of an unlucky Ukrainian priest – perhaps already dead in the brutal repression of the church that we watch on Vertov's almost comically joyful images.

The crowd demands: "Away with the steeples!" The Masses cheer.

Drunken music pours over the Timofeyev piece, and gives way to a mad reel as the people parade the icons out of the church, whose arrogant steeples are being dragged earthward so that they no longer rival the smokestacks of the Donbass in the visible distance. With each crashing steeple, a gunshot rings out that sounds like an explosion. The ghosts of murdered priests are drowned out by the cheers of the workers and the joyful noise of the pioneer band.



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In a flurry of optical effects, the churches collapse into themselves. More revolutionary music: "The Internationale". A grinning worker from the steelworks "watches" a motorized diorama that shows the promises of socialism. Toy products whirl around a city-factory made of cardboard.

A lateral tracking shot, slow and ponderous, introduces the factory "theme" of the next movement. Loudspeakers blare, as a church, cut out of the sky at cosmic angles, is converted through fast cutting into a young worker's club. The youths stare at the transformed building with bright smiles. Did I mention they are young and

pure? You could almost eat your breakfast off their faces.

The movement ends with a stunning optical: an explosive multiple exposure recapitulation of the visual themes introduced so far in the film. The images cameo around the space in the reconfigured and repurposed church.

Vertov then decodes the alien machine sound for us. We now recognize the drone tone from earlier as the sound of the colliery elevator wheel, now crowned by the Red Star.

The next movement begins with the *acousmetre* telling us, rather strangely, that "it happened in the Donbass, during the Five Year Plan in 1930". Which means we are watching "history" – but as actuality. A temporal displacement.

Workers in abstract compositions – black figures cut out against the sky – walk away from their place of work. A whistle shrieks again, this time in an odd, emergency rhythm. The voice tells us: "There is no more coal." Vertov's camera pans over empty coal boxes. The

whistle changes key, shrieking, conveying more alarm in a lower key. The alert goes out – electric noise, telegraphic – nervous excitement.

The *acousmetre* states the problem of this cinematic movement in the symphony: “The country needs to be given coal.” A crowd stands and sings “The Internationale”. We hear the sounds of a train and the marching band. The whistle of alarm again beats out its rhythm.

Vertov gives us another sonic “angle” on “The Internationale”: another group singing the holy anthem in a different acoustical space. And an earnest party organizer in a white coat stands in a field of white flowers and asks the workers: “What are we going to do now?” The whole country must be mobilised in a military fashion for the five-year plan to succeed. This new crisis demands a new type of worker: the *UDARNIK* – the shock worker of the first five-year plan.

Another lateral shot breaks up the montage rhythm. A horse-driven mine-cart drives across the frame. We hear the real sound of the mine interior.

Engine noises fade in over this human mobilisation: pistons and rhythmic noise, as mine workers practice their moves in comical drills. They swing axes robotically, but the wooden stump is untouched. Vertov intercuts the drilling workers in the open space with their black-faced comrades in the mine.

We hear the sound of hammering and pumping. From the top of the colliery elevator, the drive wheel starts up. There is the distinctive drone sound again, but from a new sonic “angle”; the wheel seems to respond to the calls of the workers who pledge to deliver 28,000 tons of coal for the hungry steel factory. The *udarnik* woman stands with the colliery elevator over her shoulder. She, too, promises to exceed the quota and, as if by magic, another elevator starts up.

And suddenly a rain of coal drops from the conveyor onto the sorting belt as women continue the separation process. A voice reminds us that all Russia depends on the efforts of the coal workers. A train passes two workers on a stairway.

“We workers go to the Donbass Front!”

The coal problem solved, the next movement shows the *udarniki* heeding the call of the Donbass factories to the sound and image of marching bands. Revolutionary marches alternate with rain-like black-mine noise as the *acousmetre* tells us what we are seeing ...

“Here come the Udarniki!”

“Here come the Enthusiasts!”

Here some of the least-enthusiastic workers in the long history of enthusiasm trudge toward their misery. Not even the red flag can stir them.

“Here comes the Metal!”

“Here comes the Coal!”

The non-human material flows more enthusiastically. The *acousmetre* says that “Donbass launches the attack!” Hot molten pig-iron flows into the furnaces. Coal again rattles on



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the conveyor. More flags and workers flutter under stirring music.

Industrial pounding, abstract and sourceless, and men yelling over the din. More rattling coal conveyors.

The *acousmetre* is proud to announce that "the quota was met in the plan's decisive year!" Piston sounds give way to rhythmic whistles. Steam vents into the sky. Trains pull out of mines and we know without a doubt that "Coal for the factories" is on its way.

Visual Musique Concrete

At about the 40th minute of the film, Vertov's images explode into purely abstract visual lyricism in a song for Stalinism. This, not coincidentally, coincides with the segment of the film that shows us the making of steel.

The images – trams in the sky bearing iron scrap for the factory intercut with three men working in unison to bring a massive sledgehammer down – Vertov syncs with a gunshot/explosion sound. Each hammer blow is reinforced by the *acousmetre's* slogans:

"An Affair of Honour!" -- CLANG!!

"A Point of Glory" -- CLANG!!

"A Matter of Courage and Heroism" -- BLAM!!

Steam whistles shriek. Someone says: "We are fighters on the front line of fire." We seem to be in hell. Workers tend flame-belching holes in the roof of the factory. The montage repeats in infinite, beautiful variation: the trams in the sky, the workers and the hammer, and the men tending the fire.

If the standard practice of the 30-degree rule represents visually consonant "thirds" or "fifths" in interval theory, in his parallel cutting Vertov often returns to the "same" object with a ten-degree shift (often more) in two dimensions, doubly forcing us out of our previous fixed or "objectified" POV in regard of the object. This is cinematic cubism.

While this seems to argue against the Marxist-scientific power of Vertov's images, there is an oppressive reinforcing effect to the repetitions that feels like brainwashing. Vertov's views of things are more complex than Eisenstein's ideograms, but ultimately the reductive effect is the same – particularly if you only watch the film one time. And, certainly, Vertov often re-used footage as if he had found some perfect actualisation of a certain type of event.



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The whistle blows again – we go inside the massive sheds of the factory – light pours down through the smoke of the shops in the Cathedral of Stalinism.

The segment moves into a frenetic ballet. Vertov's kinoks start undercranking their machines – white-hot steel flies out of the forge machines at impossible speeds. The montage reaches MTV velocity. Stokers throw coal into the furnaces, a power shovel drives again and again into the open mouth of the blast furnace. The danger and harshness of the work of the steelworker gives him the heroic stature in

Vertov's scheme. This is the paradigm of the *Udarnik* that all who watch must follow.

The iron keeps coming on the skyway; rivers of molten metal flow down into the forge. Gears push out a white-hot steel bar out of a machine and then back in. A female *udarnik* waits for her turn to pull a chain. Industrial bells ring. The power shover turns. The woman pulls on the chain, smiling, self-conscious before the camera eye. The shovel turns. Glowing metal pours out. The power shovel returns to the bowel of the furnace. A machine spits out a glowing slab of steel.

Stokers throw more coal into the furnace. An ironworker grabs a glowing snake of steel with tongs, and turns and deftly feeds it into another part of the machine. He does this again and again without fail. The sequence repeats according to Vertov's scheme of interval variation. The stoker. The "snake handler" with the tongs. The power shovel. A new element. A man with large tongs wields a hot steel girder just inches from his feet. Other men grab new blocks of steel with mechanical fingers.

Men working at the edge of the furnace push a piece of iron or steel into the heat. This is heroism, Vertov seems to say.

But let's pause here to note that, despite the tremendous fluidity and skill of the execution, *Enthusiasm* really is Fascist filmmaking of a different, more subtle order than Riefenstahl's. *Enthusiasm* is quite literally a film about Stalinism. I didn't fully realize this until I noticed that the film is structured around a visual pun. At a certain point, over shots of trains leaving the Donbass, the *acousmetre* announces: "Fully loaded wagons leave the Donbass – wagons loaded with coal and 'Stalin'" (or, as we say in English, "steel").

In *Triumph of the Will*, the godlike leader is the answer from on high, the personification of the people's will. It is clearly idealism. In *Enthusiasm*, in accordance with the doctrine of Marx, the leader is MATERIALIZED, transubstantiated into the Bessemer-Siemens process. What does the Soviet society need? Toward what does all the noise and thunder of the Five Year Plan tend? For what do we need the coal and iron and fire? What does the whole Donbass region finally produce? STALIN. And where does this "material" go? In trains, wagons and cars – into the structure of everything, the armature of the Soviet state – into tanks, guns, buildings and finally into tractors for the peasants. Soviet society cannot function without "Stalin". It needs more Stalin because ... STALIN is EVERYWHERE.

Vertov's additional political goal, according to his theoretical program, was to show the workers in each segment of the socialist reality their place in the "big picture". The role of kino-eye was to use the camera to de-alienate the worker from his own labour and that of his fellows. He uses montage to sew the workers in the mines, railroads and factories into a braid of production.

Vertov:

The textile worker ought to see the worker in a factory making a machine essential to the textile worker. The worker at the machine tool plant ought to see the miner who gives the factory its essential fuel, coal. The coal miner ought to see the peasant who produces the bread that is essential to him. (5)

But to do this with any kind of practical success, Vertov needs to establish a Utopian role for the camera and microphone in the socialist reality.

Vertov's Revolutionary Panopticon

Fifty years after Vertov's unmourned death, faced with increasingly diminishing returns from the dream factory, the world is discovering the real again – as critics hail Iranian and Chinese masters of the long take. A person named Michael Winterbottom hybridises fiction and fact in acclaimed pseudo-realist films (Real Torture! Real Pop Songs! Real Fucking!) and the proles settle down to watch everypersons running the rat-mazes of reality television – the film style of surveillance is cool again.

At last, the comrades in Mass Media have re-discovered Vertov's Leninist proportion for cinema. Kino-pravda is on the loose, but what does it mean? It may well be past time to reconsider the ideology of the non-fiction film through the prism of the theory and practice of its most uncompromising advocate, Dziga Vertov.

In 1929, Vertov made the film he is most famous for, *Man with a Movie Camera*. This film was originally received as a superlative example of the city symphony. More recently, the film has become the darling of post-modern theorists and filmmakers because of its unusual reflexivity. It turns the camera on itself to document both its own making and reception. Today's enthusiastic *udarniks* of postmodernity, in raptures over the visual rhetoric behind this coup de style of Vertov's, find it easy to overlook what is starkly obvious and sinister about the film.



Man with a Movie Camera

Man with a Movie Camera is an opium dream of life under the eye of a Totalitarian Panoptic Surveillance State. The giant cameras, and equally gargantuan Mikhail Kaufmans towering over masses and buildings, exist in a filmic universe where EVERYTHING is observed and recorded, including the cameramen-kinoks themselves and the audience watching it all. Reflexivity in film is a particularly noxious and dubious rhetorical device; while it legitimises the supposed "document" value of the film, it also handily reinforces and multiplies the surveillance power of the camera. By momentarily pointing the "gun" at our head, so the idea goes, we can suggest that the truth-

value of the film is increased, but it cannot help glorifying the sexy power of the "gun". I suppose that this rhetorical technique will eventually look as phoney as any of the other forms of "truth rhetoric" in non-fiction films.

There are two primal pleasures in the cinema with which there is no arguing: the joy of watching movement and the more perverse joy of looking at people in secret (as if in possession of Socrates' famous Gyges' ring). The camera (and its extension in Vertov's scheme) makes such surveillance not only possible but pleasurable, entertaining and educational. The reconnaissance of real life. "The film *Life Caught Unawares* [aka *Kinoglaz*, 1924] was presented as 'the camera's first reconnaissance' of real life", wrote Vertov. (6)

There is no need to add that Vertov's famous slogan, "Life Caught Unawares", is the time-proven watchword of the Cheka, OGPU, NKVD, KGB, Gestapo, FBI, CIA, Mossad, and Candid Camera ... You think I exaggerate for polemical effect? Why, Vertov helpfully makes the analogy himself:

The work of the movie camera is reminiscent of the work of the agents of the GPU who do not know what lies ahead but have a definite assignment: to separate out and bring to light a particular issue, a particular affair [...] (7)

And, as Vertov once reminded his cameramen using the worker's voice, in a manual for kinoks, "The film worker's task is to film us so as not to interfere with our work." (8) The *reductio ad absurdum* of this slogan is unseen surveillance.

"We wanted to film all shots unobserved ..." (9) For this, Vertov suggested three techniques to really catch life red-handed:

1. "The best method is *candid, concealed shooting* ..." (10)
2. Documenting of demonstrations or conferences.
3. Diverting of attention: "It is necessary to consider filming in which someone's attention must be diverted. That either occurs naturally, as in a factory, when the worker is engrossed in his labor, in his machine, or through artificial distraction. If someone has focused his attention on the camera, a second camera often helps." (11)

To Vertov's many pioneering achievements we can safely add father of Reality Television and Theorist of the Surveillance State. Vertov had the purity of Orwellian vision; it was Soviet technology and the blindness of the *apparatchiks* that betrayed him. The practical means of broadcast quality surveillance are inexpensively available to almost anyone today.

To see and hear life, to note its turns and turning points, to catch the crunch of the old bones of everyday existence beneath the press of the revolution, to follow the growth of the young Soviet organism, to record and organize the individual characteristics of life's phenomena into a whole, an essence, a conclusion – this is our immediate objective. It is an objective with tremendous and far from merely experimental significance. It's a general checkup on our entire transitional time and at the same time, an on-the-spot checkup, among the masses, on each individual decree or resolution. It's a thermometer or aerometer of our reality, and its significance is unquestionably higher than the inventions of individual authors, individual writers or directors. Of course this objective is beyond the strength of several people, or even several dozen people, it's an objective to be placed on the scale of the entire Soviet State. (12)

What Vertov is talking about is a factual *gesamtkunstwerk* of the entire tapestry of "Soviet Reality" that would serve both the party leadership and the masses themselves in mirroring back the forceful contraction of "Soviet Reality". An army of kinoks would dissolve the authorship of such a mass work. Nothing should escape the camera. No detail of life would be irrelevant to the state-mind processing the database of images into a filmic structure called reality. At times, with an almost Borgesian insolence, Vertov seems to suggest that the image-construction of the reality is more important to the function of the state than the actuality of any particular aspect of life of the Soviets. Perhaps Vertov got something fundamental about the communist mirage, seeing more deeply, that the state itself, faced with its perpetual shortcomings, had a compulsion to live through its images.

Days of Heaven: The Last Segment of the Film

In the last ten minutes of *Enthusiasm*, Vertov makes a half-hearted attempt to deal with collectivisation. Shooting under primitive conditions far from electricity with unreliable equipment, Vertov had generated mountains of unusable material in this project. The sound quality of some of the farming sequences has an oceanic feel to its distortion. This last section feels disjointed and rather wounded, but it is a fine example for scholars of early 20th-century tractor worship.

The sequence is not without interest, however. It begins with a long shot of a group of

farm women, who simultaneously sing in “close-up”. The steel of the prior movement is transformed into tractors for the collective farms. Again, the kolkhoz workers are exhorted to over-fulfil the plan. They clap at the good news.

Another parade and, for the first and only time, Vertov acknowledges the party leadership by showing us the frightening death’s head of the grinning Stanislav V. Kossior – the future architect of the terror famine, eventual politburo member and, like almost all of Stalin’s bloody henchmen, a guest of the firing squad. So *kino-pravda* lives up to its name, if only for a moment. Not even Kossior is immune to the gun-camera’s kiss. The murderer smiles shyly, almost modestly, and throws up his hands in a gesture of good-natured impatience.

And it is clear from the enthusiastic dancing of some of the kolkhoz workers that the scourge of vodka continues to hold some of the *udarniki* in its iron thrall.

Another parade of collective farm workers marching in song past the nice brigade tractor. *Thanks, Comrade Stalin!*

The penultimate sequence in the film is also interesting as a Vertovian montage. Cutting back and forth from a “subjective” shot of a young woman feeding hay into a thresher, the camera at medium-shot distance just slightly below the subject, to an “objective” view from the ground next to the tractor which is using a drive wheel and belt to drive the thresher. The second shot physically connects the worker to the tractor, a unity and interdependence of human and machine. And, at the same time, Vertov alters the position of the recording so that the hum of the belt in the two shots alters pitch musically. Only the flag flapping next to the girl gives a sense of continuity.

Terrence Malick, apparently an aficionado of early 20th-century photography and film clearly used this film as visual inspiration for his film, *Days of Heaven* (1978). Shots of the work sequences in Chicago and on the farm in Texas specifically recall Vertov’s images of work. Is it possible that Malick is a true-blue Vertovian? When Malick first used the Steadicam to suggest a free-floating, aimless, drifting dirigible-like POV, like a ghost observing the baffling activities of humanity, it does feel like the narrative application of kino-eye principles. And Malick’s recent movies in particular show that the Vertovian way of looking at the world is not dead, even in narrative cinema.

Malick’s recent fascination with the narrative ellipse, anti-dramatic staging, and musical editing and non-synch sound montage has left even his usual defenders baffled. These films (*The Thin Red Line*, 1998, and *The New World*, 2005) are a strange hybrid of the early avant-garde and the conventional. But let’s also remember that Malick also goes to great lengths to create fictional worlds that are in some way real to the participants – making his actors learn the ‘lost’ language of the worlds of Virginia or World War II New Guinea, and his penchant for capturing accidental moments of natural phenomena, eternally confusing the ground with the figure of the story. I suggest that these are all things that are rooted in the Vertovian philosophy of “life as it is ...”.

The Poetics of Stalinism



Enthusiasm

As the heart of his film, Vertov uses the steel-making process as a poetic metaphor for the transformation of both the state and the individual in socialism. This metaphor gives yet another formal layer to the structure of *Enthusiasm*. The production of steel is a process whereby pig-iron, an impure alloyed mix of several metals and therefore weak and brittle under extreme force, is shot into a converter chamber where air is forced through the metal, driving the impurities out and leaving only the "pure" steel, which has the virtues of tensility and strength.

How does a nation of backward hick farmers become the industrialized fulfilment of Marxist prophecy? What dynamic element can make this transformation happen: Factories, Tractors, Machines?

It is thus with the people – the hot fiery blast of socialism and the wind of a thousand slogans hurls away their tsarist trinkets and entertainments, their religion, their selfishness, and their vodka – and re-tools them into supermen, Shock Workers, Machine-Men and Machine-Women of Steel. That is the real object of the word Stalinism and the Five Year Plan. The steelification – the Stalinization – of the human being.

The *acousmetre*:

In the days of struggle to fulfil the plan ... of the proletariats' inconceivable heroism ... of the boost in socialist rivalry, mines and factories proclaim: Socialism's construction advances at full speed.

At the "full speed", we see two trains yoked together almost in slow motion. This may be an accident of Kubelka's resynchronisation or it may have been humorously intentional on Vertov's part. Trains leave the Donbass, mission accomplished, bearing their precious cargoes of "Stalin". But Vertov would pay a heavy price for being so oblique, so poetic, in his praise for Stalin and the five-year plan.

Karl Radek, apostate-Trotskyite-turned-Stalinist-lackey, opportunistically used an attack on Vertov's film to curry himself more favour with Stalin. He correctly noted that Vertov had completely missed the brutal tone of the Five Year Plan. There was no place for naïve celebration of the shock worker and the filling of quotas.

Enthusiasm, Radek said, was

a film that lacks cowards, forgets to show the action of shock-workers, a film in which negative aspects are blurred, in which militants do nothing, and which does not represent the greatness of the Five-Year plan by which peasants "are transformed into factory workers and into kolkhoz-workers". (13)

The party had declared war on kulaks, NEPmen, saboteurs and all other class enemies. There would be no peaceful coexistence with them. Obviously, Vertov was a fool, an idiot, to downplay the dangers facing the workers' state. He didn't have the guts for class warfare. He was mired in "Hallelujahism". Vertov, as a doctrinaire communist, probably understood these political realities as well as Radek. But he was too much of an artist to bow to them so crudely. Call it hubris. If he was an idiot, he is an idiot like Myshkin, an aristocrat of communism surrounded by petty graspers like Radek, all jockeying for position. Through the rest of the 1930s, Vertov showed a singular inability or willingness to

adapt every time a new wind blew from the party. He was ultimately unable to properly Stalinize himself. He lacked tensility.

Vertov resorted to making what is hidden in *Enthusiasm* overt in his next film. This was a commission for Willi Münzenberg – propaganda for export. In *Tri pesni o Lenine* (*Three Songs of Lenin*, 1934), Vertov composed a melancholy séance for the ghost of Lenin. Lenin, who is a spirit now, is materialized in the people themselves. He haunts them. Something has changed in the materialist Vertov now – he now believes in “APPARITIONS”. The film is more conventional, more cloyingly sentimental than anything that he has made before. The image of an empty bench in winter almost makes one weep. At last Vertov has made a film that deifies the leader. The rhetoric of the film says that Lenin lives on in the spirit of the people – in the folk songs. But the “feel” of the film plays against this. Vertov tries to escape to a reality that denies both Stalin and Stalinism. The fatal problem with *Three Songs of Lenin* is that he is deifying the wrong leader. It is absolutely the wrong film for the time. Eventually, Vertov is forced to re-edit it, undocumenting certain political undesirables out of the film, and adding more STALIN to the film.



Three Songs for Lenin

At this point, he cannot but fall ill. Nervous breakdown. Though he lives for almost twenty more years, Vertov is never allowed to make a film according to his own peculiar designs. Most tragically, he sincerely cannot understand why.

Ah, Myshkin!

But this story is not a tragedy. Vertov doesn't quite cut a tragic figure – he is neither dangerous (aware) enough or reckless enough to fall into the communist meat-grinder. Perhaps he was simply lucky. He hits the placid mean of the “useful idiot” – he kept believing in Lenin and Stalin at the expense of the bloody reality – “life as it is” carried into the mind as a psychological principle. How did Denis Abramovich Kaufman (14) not see what was happening around him? Simple, he was always looking through his camera and at his strips of film. He never trusted his poor human eyes, anyway.

I can't help but think that Vertov's moral and political blindness is a consequence of his constructivist aesthetic (which to some extent we all share, insofar as we occasionally fall asleep at the wheel and “experience” our media uncritically) – his mistrust of his eyes and ears, and his blind faith in the mechanical eye of the camera. He became an early victim of the seductive power of theory and image over world.

Note about the Film Source

The Austrian Film Museum has released the excellent dual edition of *Entuziazm* (*Simfonija Donbassa*) (Filmmuseum DVD 01) that includes the re-synchronized, black stock version of 1972, and the “original” Gosfilmofond print which is the parent of the Kubelka version. The DVD edition has a film starring the irrepressible, always entertaining Peter Kubelka talking about his work adjusting the soundtrack to match certain film/sound synch-events in the film. I have used the Kubelka version to study the film. The print is beautiful and clear, and wears its battle history proudly.

The Austrian Film Museum has also published a bilingual (German-English) catalogue of their extensive Vertov collection as their publication 04. The catalogue includes many writings, scripts, images, posters and diagrams not available in any form anywhere else. Available at www.filmmuseum.at.

There is no doubt that both of these will become essential works for Vertov studies.

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Endnotes

1. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot*, Project Gutenberg e-Text, translated by Eva Martin, accessed at www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext01/idiot10.txt. ▲
2. Dziga Vertov, *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, Annette Michelson (Ed.), translated by Kevin O'Brien (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 209. ▲
3. Vertov, p. 88. ▲
4. Bill Nichols, "Documentary and the Coming of Sound", accessed at www.filmsound.org/film-sound-history/documentary.htm. ▲
5. Vertov, p. 52. ▲
6. Ibid, p. 94. ▲
7. Ibid, p. 69. ▲
8. Ibid, p. 92. ▲
9. Ibid, p. 100. ▲
10. Ibid, p. 100. ▲
11. Ibid, p. 100. ▲
12. Ibid, p. 47. ▲
13. Karl Radek, "Deux Films", in the daily *Mir*, 5 December 1931, quoted in Annette Michelson, *Dziga Vertov Revisited, A Russian Filmmaker and His Legacy*. April 24 – May 6, 1984. Presented by the Joseph Papp's Public Theater, the Collective for Living Cinema and Anthology Film Archives. Program of an exhibition. 28 pages. ▲
14. Birth name of Dziga Vertov. ▲

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