

“Peace between Man and Machine”

Dziga Vertov's *The Man with a Movie Camera*

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In 1930, when Dziga Vertov's *The Man with a Movie Camera* (*Chelovek s kinoapparatom*, 1929) was the first Soviet film he saw, the young critic Jay Leyda found himself “reeling” from a New York theater, “too stunned to sit through it again” (Leyda 251). This was, one could only surmise, the desired effect. Vertov's film was, like the speeding cars, the intersecting trolleys and spinning gears depicted in it, a high-speed machine meant to shock the viewer into empathy with the industrial age. It was a high point in early modernism's desire to wed art and the machine. It was also the product of a time when there was still hope for a totally scientific understanding of human experience. And the film was still more. For what Vertov showed us in *The Man with a Movie Camera* was not just anybody's industrial age. Leyda, who was to become the English-speaking world's preeminent historian and champion of the Soviet cinema, found in the film the dynamism of the Soviet revolution itself. This was the revolution not only at work, but working within the precision of Vertov's precisely edited montages.

Vertov's life had made him an embodiment of the film's concerns, an all but perfect manifestation of the three decades that preceded *The Man with a Movie Camera*. He was born Denis Abramovich Kaufman on January 2, 1896, the Thursday after the Lumière brothers held cinema's first commercial screening in Paris. The Kaufman family resided in Bialystok, Poland, then part of the Russian empire. Young Denis Abramovich (he would later Russify

his Jewish patronymic to “Arkadevich”) studied music, an interest that was to remain with him for the rest of his career. In 1915, Vertov's family fled to Moscow and a year later to St. Petersburg. Vertov enrolled in the Psychoneurological Institute but soon gravitated toward the city's avant-garde cafes. It was there that he made the acquaintance of the young Futurist poet Vladimir Mayakovsky and one of the founders of the Russian school of formalist critics, Viktor Shklovsky.¹

It was during this period that Denis Arkadevich Kaufman took on the Futurist pseudonym “Dziga Vertov,” a term which may be roughly translated as “spinning top” or “spinning gypsy.” Vertov's avant-gardism is, in itself, a significant aspect of his films and his career. Like the St. Petersburg avant-garde and the Italian Futurists who inspired them, he maintained a contempt for the classic arts. We might draw a straight line from the Italians' condemnation of the Italian legacy to Mayakovsky's call to destroy Russian museums to Vertov's “sentence of death” passed on all previous film (Vertov, “Kinoniki,” *Kino-Eye* 138).² For Vertov, the rebirth of film studios in the Soviet Union—and the consequent Soviet “Golden Age”—was a betrayal of what the cinema could have been. Vertov's avant-garde contempt for the classical expresses itself in *The Man with a Movie Camera* in what was then seen as the film's most scandalous image. Toward the end of the film, Vertov uses a split screen shot to make it appear as if the Bolshoi Theatre—that icon of traditional Russian performance—collapses in upon itself.

But if one was to destroy all of classical art, what then would replace it? Inspired by the Italian Futurists and their Russian imitators, Vertov was determined to show the world seen by the movie camera *as the entire cinematic apparatus sees it* (i.e., including the editing as well as the filming process). In *The Man with a Movie Camera*, images are taken from every conceivable camera angle and distance, as well as employing numerous types of camera movement. We see the world in normal motion, slow motion, split frame and freeze frame. And we see shots edited not only into seamlessly constructed sequences but also edited by theme (e.g., a shot of a movie poster for a film called *A Woman Awakens* is followed by a shot of a woman awakening). The pace of the editing ranges from the leisurely to the frenetic, from unobtrusive to dazzling sequences of one and two shots.

From the early 1920s, Vertov articulated the reasons for presenting the world this way in a series of manifestos that took his ideas well beyond those of the early Futurists. One of the most telling summaries of Vertov's intentions comes in his 1922 manifesto “We”:

Because people cannot control their movements, we will until further notice not include them as subjects in our films.

Our way takes us through the poetic machine, from the corpulent gentleman to the perfect electric man.

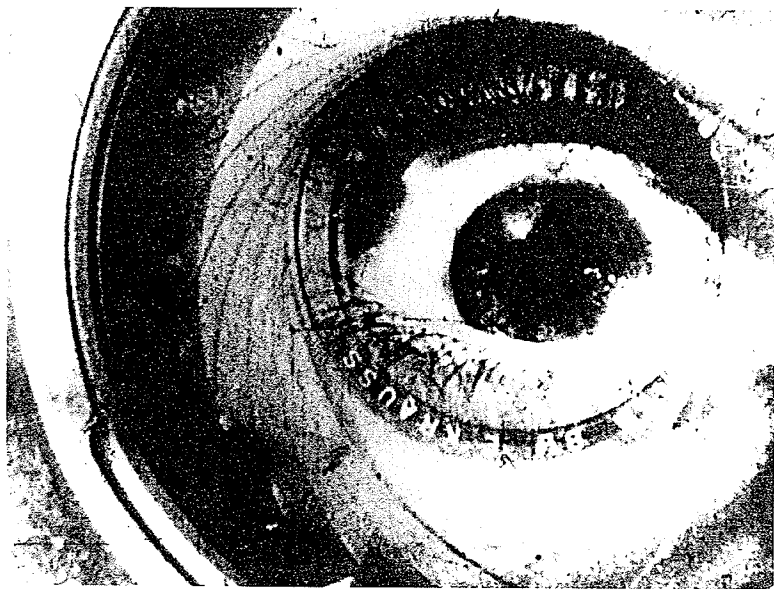
We reveal the soul of the machine, causing the worker to love his workplace, the peasant his tractor, the engineer his engine

We bring joy to mechanical labor

We make peace between man and machine

We train the new man. (Vertov, *Kino-Eye 11*)

Vertov's intent, then, is not simply to celebrate the cinema—or any other machine—in its own right. He breaks, for instance, with the Italian Futurists' glorification of speed and power for its own sake (an obsession which was to make them the official artists of Mussolini's fascism). In all of his work—and most particularly in *The Man with a Movie Camera*—Vertov is looking for “peace between man and machine.” We see this from the beginning of the film, when the blinking eye of a real awakened woman is intercut with the blinking Venetian blinds. We see it in the larger design of the film in the way that Vertov uses the camera in the same way to augment both the nature of the mechanical world and the human body (as with the athletes shown later in the film). And we see it in the justly famous recurring logo of the film itself, the human eye superimposed on the camera lens.



The Man with a Movie Camera: The justly famous recurring logo of the film itself, the human eye superimposed on the camera lens.

Making peace between man and machine is also the theme of Vertov's own creative biography. In 1917, he established a “Laboratory of Sound” where, working with a Pathé wax disc recorder, Vertov attempted to record sounds both inside and outside the studio and then reedit them into entirely new compositions. He was, in essence, attempting to create concrete music. The nature of the equipment mitigated against achieving satisfying results: the recorders were cumbersome, the field recordings unsatisfactory, and the editing from one machine to another only diminished what little sound quality was obtained. Nevertheless, the use of sound in this manner was a goal that remained with Vertov. It appears in his ingenious cutting of the silent cinema orchestra in *The Man with a Movie Camera*. Indeed, the film's cutting to the tempo of all manner of loud machines and human activities makes this one of the noisiest silent films ever made.

Vertov's early experiments with sound are also an indication of his formalist inclinations. He was attempting not only to record sound but to break it down into its constituent parts and put them back together—to define musical composition as a scientific or mechanical process. Vertov's formalism is, of course, central to the larger design of *The Man with a Movie Camera*. This is a movie about the making of a movie. The “parts” of that movie and the assembly of those parts are continually made visible to us. The cameraman is shooting; we see the product of his shots. We also see the editor at work; she pulls clips off the shelf that suddenly fill the screen before us. Here is a clip labelled “child”; here is a child on the screen. Later we see that same child edited into a (now subverted) illusion of reality—appropriately enough, the sequence of the magician's act. In *The Man with a Movie Camera*, we even see the mechanics of projecting a film as the projectionist threads the reel, creates the arc light, and switches on the projector to show us the movie within the movie.

In the context of the Soviet revolution, there is a political message to Vertov's Futurist and formalist strategies. Vertov is not only saying that “art is a machine” but also implying that we, the audience, must be made aware of this fact. We must be told that machines are made by people; and art is not magic, it is labor, the very labor we see on the screen. In a broader sense, this is the sort of thinking that lured many of the Russian formalists and Futurists to an enthusiastic support of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution.

Vertov's contribution to the revolution coincided with his beginnings in cinema. In 1918, he joined the Moscow Cinema Committee to work on the first Soviet newsreel series, *Kinonedelia* (*Cinema Weekly*). His own description of his recruitment suggests a link between his unsuccessful sound experiments and his earliest conceptions of what the cinema could offer him. It reads almost as a shot list from *The Man with a Movie Camera*:

And once in the Spring of 1918, I was returning from a railroad station. In my ears, there remained the chugs and bursts of steam from a depart-



The Man with a Movie Camera: The editor of Vertov's film at work in the film.

ing train . . . somebody cries out . . . laughter, a whistle, voices, the station bell, the clanking of a locomotive . . . whispers, shouts, farewells . . . And walking away I thought there is a need to find a machine not only to describe but to register, to photograph these sounds. Otherwise, one cannot organize or assemble them. They fly like time. Perhaps a camera? That records the visual. But to organize the visual world and not the audible world? Is this the answer?

And at this moment I met Mikhail Kol'tsov who offered me a job in cinema. (*Kino-Eye* 40)

Vertov began his work as Kol'tsov's secretary, sorting the newsreel footage coming into Moscow from across Soviet-held territory. He began editing the footage and, when Kol'tsov was drafted, Vertov became head of *Kinonedelia*. While Vertov himself admitted that the series (which withered from lack of resources in 1919) was not particularly distinguished, it did lead him to consider both the nature and potential of cinema. Sitting in the Moscow Cinema Committee's studios, he watched and edited images of the far-flung Russian civil war—one of the first people to watch the news unfold in a daily influx of moving images. Vertov was also engaged in the remarkable propa-

ganda experiments of the early revolution: screenings in the streets and in factories, making and showing films on the agit-prop trains that crisscrossed the country. He was responsible for two of the earliest historical compilation films, his *Anniversary of the Revolution* (1919) and *History of the Civil War* (1922). Ever the good Futurist-Bolshevik, he wrote the history of the revolution not on paper but with a manifestation of the hi-tech future it promised.

Throughout his career, Vertov insisted on the ideological link between the cinema of fact and the goals of the revolution. He often quoted what he termed "the Leninist proportion," Lenin's own declaration that Soviet filmmaking was to be largely geared toward propaganda and educational film³—and, for his troubles, was roundly denounced by the emerging Soviet feature film industry. This ideological battle over the proper nature of cinema is also a part of what we see in *The Man with a Movie Camera*. The film is, to some extent, Vertov's 1929 declaration that the agitational-propaganda role for cinema could be best practiced as it had been ten years earlier—in the streets and with the people and things that could be found there. His goal in the film is to present a Soviet utopia, a place where almost everything and everyone works as well as the movies. Vertov tells us that the proof of this argument is that what we see before us is recognizable reality, our reality, brought to us by cinema workers who are people no different than ourselves.

Vertov's absolute belief in the power of nonfiction film was his contribution to Soviet film theory. He came to his conclusion as the result of what he saw as a scientific experiment. Arranging for a cameraman to film his descent in slow motion, Vertov jumped from a second story balcony.

The results. From the point of view of the ordinary eye it goes like this: the man walked to the edge of the balcony, bowed, smiled, jumped, landed on his feet and that is all. What was it in slow motion? A man walks to the edge of the balcony, vacillating. To jump or not to jump? Then it is as if his thoughts say that everything points to the need to jump. I am entirely uncomfortable. Everyone is looking at me. Again doubt. Will I break a leg? I will. No, I won't. I must jump, I cannot just stand here. An indecisive countenance is replaced by a look of firm decision. The man slowly goes off the balcony. He is already situated in mid-air. Again, fear on his face. On the man's face are clearly seen his thoughts. (Vertov, *Kino-Eye* 123)

Vertov's experiment bridged his early exposure to the St. Petersburg avant-garde and his cinematic career. It "proved" the observational power of the medium—film, Vertov concluded, can read minds. But it could do so only if used to its full capacity—in this case, slow motion. The camera, for Vertov, would be liberated from any demand to reproduce an imitation of life as the

human eye saw it. Editing must be freed from the obligation to produce a seamless narrative.

It was with these concepts in mind that Vertov embarked on the series of films which would culminate in *The Man with a Movie Camera*, the fullest expression of his experiment and many manifestos. In retrospect, we begin to see *The Man with a Movie Camera* emerge in 1922, when Vertov began his collaboration with his new wife and editor, Elizaveta Svilova, and his recently demobilized brother and cameraman, Mikhail Kaufman—the film's principal "cast." It was in that year that this "Council of Three" (the signature on Vertov's early manifestos) undertook the production of the *Kinopravda* news-reel series (1922–1925). In the course of its twenty-three issues, *Kinopravda* moved from a conventional representation of news items to thematic studies incorporating increasingly ambitious formal experimentation (Feldman 1979).

Kinopravda and the films that come between it and *The Man with a Movie Camera* arrive at a remarkable period in Soviet history. Lenin's 1921 proclamation of the New Economic Policy (NEP), an official tolerance of a mixed economy, restored the shattered nation to the point where regular film production was once again a possibility. With this social and economic pragmatism came a significant degree of artistic tolerance. It was in this heady atmosphere that artists like Vertov could begin to dream. Vertov proposed, for instance, that Soviet films be shot by large numbers of ordinary citizens acting as film scouts, edited collectively and exchanged in a vast nationwide network. To illustrate this activity (as he would later illustrate his broader aesthetic in *The Man with a Movie Camera*), Vertov made his first feature documentary, *Kinoglaz* (*Cinema Eye—Life Caught Unawares*, 1924), a film in which the Pioneers (the newly formed Soviet version of the Boy Scouts) bring the camera to the nooks and crannies of daily life. The group's next film *Stride, Soviet!* (1925), was a commissioned documentary made to celebrate the achievements of the Moscow city government. Vertov's *Sixth Part of the Earth* (1926), commissioned by Gostorg, the State Import-Export Agency, was a bold experiment in editing. It used the silent film title cards as a poetic text to link disparate shots of life from across the Soviet Union.

The formal experimentation in *Sixth Part of the Earth* earned Vertov a prize at the World Exposition in Paris. Gostorg was less enthusiastic. The export agency did not appreciate a sequence at the beginning of the film caricaturing the decadence of Western life, that is, the lives of their potential customers. Gostorg's complaint to Vertov's studio, Sovkino, was abetted by the general hostility Vertov had generated by his unceasing attacks on narrative filmmakers. It was one thing to condemn all narrative filmmaking in the early 1920s, when there were very few such films being made in the Soviet Union; but by the mid-1920s, the international success of films like Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) gave feature filmmakers new prominence.

With that prominence came influence and it was that influence which cost Vertov his job at Sovkino in January, 1927.

Without a work card, Vertov was forced to leave Moscow. He, Svilova, and Kaufman found work at VUFKU, the Ukrainian Film Studio. Their next film, *The Eleventh Year* (1928), was a work commissioned to celebrate the success of the Five Year Plan in the Ukraine. While filming *The Eleventh Year*, Vertov was making notes for *The Man with a Movie Camera*—the most adamant of his many angry responses to his dismissal and the living assertion of the nature of cinema he had "proven" in the continuing experiment of his previous work.

It is, then, this need to reassert his principles, along with his long embrace of Futurism, formalism, and communism, that shapes Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera*. This is the world—and the world of cinema—as Vertov saw it and wished it would work. Even by 1929 Vertov had reason to believe that this vision was only possible on the screen, a remembrance of optimism past. But because he believed that, he wished his film to be as polished an argument as he could make it.

Vertov's argument in *The Man with a Movie Camera* can be summarized by two phrases that recur throughout his manifestos and are coupled in the title of his first feature: "Life Caught Unawares" and the "Cinema Eye." "Life caught unawares" expressed Vertov's profound commitment to the observational abilities of cinema. This in itself made fiction filmmaking relatively uninteresting if not entirely pointless. The kind of film that took full advantage of cinema's inherent observational powers, as one of the introductory titles of *The Man with a Movie Camera* proclaims, was "A Film without Actors." It would have to be "A Film without a Scenario," just as it was (after its opening credits) "A Film without Title Cards." Yet as we explore *Life Caught Unawares*, we are also urged in opening titles to remember its ultimate goal, the production of a completely self-enclosed cinema world. As the last of the opening titles of *The Man with a Movie Camera* tells us: "This experimental work was made with the purpose of creating a true international pure language of cinema characterized by its total differentiation from the language of theatre and literature." This, in one sentence, is the Cinema Eye.

We get to the Cinema Eye through *Life Caught Unawares*, for one can only manipulate images by being true to their origins in the living world. In practice, the means of achieving *Life Caught Unawares* varies. It is more than "candid camera." We might, for instance, view the images of the woman getting dressed near the beginning of *The Man with a Movie Camera* as just such an invasion of privacy. But in the larger context of the film, it is also an agreement between the director and his subject that the camera has a right to be anywhere. And ubiquitous the camera certainly is. From dawn to dusk, Mikhail Kaufman, the man with a movie camera, races about town in the back seat of a convertible. He not only visits the workplace and exhausts a long list

of recreational sites, but rushes to the scene of an accident and is found in the middle of a motorcycle race. He and his tripod ride a carousel and wade into the surf. The camera watches a couple fill out a marriage certificate and then, metaphorically, swings about to watch another couple file for divorce. It is present at the birth of a baby and at a funeral. In this same sequence, there is a remarkable cut between the baby emerging from its mother's womb and the cameraman superimposed upon a v-shaped convergence of buildings. This cut on form appears as a proclamation of the cameraman's own birth from the womb of the urban world.

Few people filmed in *The Man with a Movie Camera* object to being the subjects of a film. As the cinema verité filmmakers of the 1960s would rediscover, the goal of observational filmmaking was not so much to hide the camera as it was to find situations in which the camera was not the principal concern of the people being filmed. When this fails in Vertov's work, it is the subject not the camera which is suspect. The cameraman, for instance, awakens people sleeping on park benches, some of whom are not pleased to see it. The woman filing for divorce tries to cover her face with her handbag. Later in the film, the cameraman finds his way to the inside of a beer hall, a place of relative disrepute compared to the pristine worker's club we are to see a moment later. In a superimposed image, he rises out of a beer mug placed amid the unsuspecting patrons. Like the Pioneers in *Kinoglaz* who unmask a black marketeer, the cameraman is a spy on remnants of the decadent bourgeois world.

There are other, more overt political overtones to this ubiquitously observational cinema. We are never allowed to forget that the life being caught unawares is the life of a nascent Marxist state and, moreover, the life of that state at a very particular phase of its development. Lenin's New Economic Policy had ended the year before *The Man with a Movie Camera* was released. This, in turn, signalled the end of official tolerance for the Soviet middle class which profited from the mixed economy (the "NEP-men"). Hence, in Vertov's film the relationship of the subject with the ubiquitous filmmaking process must be viewed in the context of a transition to a stricter communist practice. There is, for instance, one sequence in the film in which we follow carriages home from the railroad station. A well-dressed woman in a carriage cranks her hand, imitating the cameraman shooting from the car beside her. Certainly, this is a person uncomfortable with the cinema workers going about their business. A few shots later, her driver dumps a steamer trunk out of the carriage onto her maid's shoulder. Vertov has connected her discomfort with the camera to her exploitation of a servant. And in so doing, he has isolated and exposed her, using the camera as a barometer of social involvement.

This condemnation of the NEP-woman is, of course, only possible within the context of film editing. Throughout *The Man with a Movie Camera*, we are reminded that the images we are seeing are not only taken from real

life but that they are identified as images, the building blocks of montage. They are made of real material, film stock which, at one point in *The Man with a Movie Camera*, even appears to break in the projector. The film clips that Svilova pulls off the shelf could have been taken anywhere (and indeed some of them do appear in Vertov's earlier work). In keeping with the spliced geography he had so brilliantly composed in *Sixth Part of the Earth*, Vertov makes no attempt to identify the city we see in *The Man with a Movie Camera*. Unlike Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin, Symphony of a Great City* (1927), we are not viewing the cinematic portrait of one place.⁴ Vertov shows us a city of cinema, a composite of all the observational images the editor has at her disposal.

Also unlike Ruttmann's film, we are continually reminded that the time frame of Vertov's work is not natural but cinematic; we are not working from sunrise to sunset but to the beat of the apparatus. *The Man with a Movie Camera* is framed by a screening—of *The Man with a Movie Camera*! When the film within the film begins, we see the Soviet equivalent of "academy leader," the number one rising, which would have been spliced to the beginning of a reel.⁵ What we see next is not only a film within a film, but the very film being made. The day begins the moment the cameraman starts to make his rounds. For much of the film, the cameraman and editor's activities are intercut until the "day" ends with a screening of the finished film—which now includes its audience. It is, in this way, perfect formalism—not only aware of its own structure but composed of nothing else.

In keeping with the notion of the filmmaker as worker, *The Man with a Movie Camera* offers us a recurring visual metaphor for the editor, that of the traffic cop in the busy intersection. It is she who controls the flow of the film images (just as the film stock itself is compared visually to a rapidly passing railroad track seen from above). And it is also her editing that bridges the concepts of "life caught unawares" and the Cinema Eye. For while the images we see are invariably the product of the ubiquitous camera, their arrangement points to visions possible only in cinema. In, for instance, the sports sequence of *The Man with a Movie Camera*, the Cinema Eye edits the image of a javelin thrower to that of a soccer goalie—making us both laugh at the incongruity and become aware of the process of editing itself. The joke would not have worked had the film not long since established the nonfiction nature of its images. But it would not exist without supplementing that observational cinema with the fuller possibilities of the medium (in this instance, editing). And it would not be a joke unless we took it for an edit of two unrelated images.

Editing is thus defined as splicing the mechanical to the human, of making "peace between man and machine." In *The Man with a Movie Camera*'s climactic sequence, it is the editing between the audience watching the film and the images on the screen that links us, as viewers, with the viewers within the film. Politically (including the politics of Vertov's dispute with the Soviet

cinema industry), the point of the montage is to tell us that this is our cinema too. And it is the context from which we may view all of Vertov's uses of the apparatus. In Vertov's experimental construct, the Cinema Eye's slow motion property even seemed capable of reading a mind. *The Man with a Movie Camera* augments that single employment of the apparatus with a deliberately encyclopedic vocabulary of devices. In Vertov's depiction of the hurdlers in the sports sequence, we once again see slow motion, though this time at varying speeds down to the point of freezing the frame. This is cinema used to read the body. Earlier in the film, we saw the speeding up of an image—a young woman stuffing cigarettes in boxes is made to appear as if she is working at superhuman speed. It is her reward for happily chatting to the cameraman and hence the camera's reading of her social involvement (his capturing, as per Vertov's manifesto, of the "worker's love of the workplace"). At the worker's club, the Cinema Eye reverses motion to help chess and checker players set up their pieces. In doing so, the camera, like the workers' club itself, enhances their leisure time.

Throughout *The Man with a Movie Camera*, it is not just the man but also the cinematic apparatus which identifies itself as a worker in the new society. Vertov's split screen allows the speeding trolley cars to pass impossibly close to one another. The Cinema Eye uses a dissolve to make a magician appear "magically" and to take the tarpaulin off a carousel. At the very beginning of the film, our cinema seats are made to fold down for us in stop action animation. And Vertov makes sure that the apparatus gets full credit for these and other useful gestures when the pixilated camera on its tripod takes a bow. In the very last shot of *The Man with a Movie Camera*, it is the camera lens/cinema eye closing its iris that ends our cinema day.

For Vertov, *The Man with a Movie Camera* was the high point of a busy career. The film was shown widely in the Soviet Union, though more in workers' clubs and other alternative venues than in movie theaters. It was exported and well received abroad. As a result, Vertov was dispatched to Western Europe to prepare for the next phase in his own development and in the development of Soviet cinema as a whole, the coming of sound. He was, not surprisingly, as contemptuous of studio sound films as he had always been of studio cinema as a whole. Vertov's response was to work with Soviet engineers to invent an audio equivalent of "life caught unawares," an apparatus that would allow for the shooting of location sound. In the film produced from that shoot, *Enthusiasm: Symphony of the Don Basin* (1930), Vertov finally realized his early dream of concrete music. *Enthusiasm* might also be said to have maintained the aesthetic of the Cinema Eye, expanding it to include the Cinema Ear. Although existing prints of the film are incomplete, it is clear from surviving sequences that Vertov cut the sound with the precision and speed he had previously cut his silent images.

Vertov's next film, *Three Songs of Lenin* (1934), is a far more austere

work. Its montage of folk songs about the canonized Bolshevik leader are cut with a respectfully slow cadence. Vertov's documentation of the people who generated those songs remains true to the observational commitment of his earliest work. The film—while skillful, mature and, at times, even moving—is an example of the heavy hand of Socialist Realism methodically crushing Futurist and formalist experimentation in all of the Soviet arts. Vertov's 1937 feature-length documentary, *Lullaby*, provides yet more evidence of this progression. It is, with its highly posed subjects and staged events, little more than a dutiful propaganda piece.

During the last period of his life, Vertov, while marginalized by the mainstream of Soviet film and its foreign supporters, continued to work. He produced a last feature-length work in 1937, *Sergo Ordzhonikidze*, named for the Soviet commander in the Ukraine during the Russian civil war, and a number of short propaganda pieces during World War II. From the end of the war until his death on February 12, 1954, Vertov worked, as he had at the beginning of his film career, as a newsreel editor. He wrote a few published articles, delivered speeches, and planned films that would never be realized (Feldman 1979).

In the years following his death, Vertov became emblematic of changing tides in cinema theory and practice. We know him today through a series of reconceptualizations that say as much about those who created them as they do about Vertov himself. During the 1950s Khrushchev "thaw," reformers in the Soviet Union began to take an interest in Vertov as an anti-Stalinist gesture. Vertov's writings began appearing in Soviet film journals as an antidote to Socialist Realism. These writings were published in a single volume (*Stat'i, dnevniki, zamysly*, 1966) just as the Khrushchev era of tolerance was beginning to fade.

Vertov was rediscovered in the West in the early 1960s, largely through the efforts of the French film historian Georges Sadoul. Sadoul inadvertently linked the name of Vertov's early newsreel series, *Kinopravda*, to what was then a new form of documentary: he translated the Russian term into its French equivalent, *cinéma vérité* (Sadoul 1963). Vertov was an inspiration to those *cinéma vérité* and French New Wave filmmakers who were taking cameras into the streets and finding their stories in the lives of ordinary people (or, in the case of the New Wave, in actors acting like ordinary people).

Later in the 1960s, Jean-Luc Godard, inspired by the communist and formalist aspects of Vertov's work, formed with his collaborator Jean-Pierre Gorin, the Dziga Vertov Group. Their project of making worker-generated political documentaries was perhaps the most apt filmic manifestation both of Vertov's original ideal of merging filmmaking with industrial labor and of the revolutionary events in France during May 1968. When the full Russian edition of Vertov's collected writings was translated into French in 1972 (*Arti-*

cles, journaux, projects), it was welcomed as a "little red book" for Godard's much publicized and frequently imitated radical communist filmmaking.

Also during the 1960s, the American avant-garde film movement adopted Vertov as one of the forerunners of its own sensibilities. The Anthology Film Archives in New York screened his films amid those of Germaine Dulac, Man Ray, Maya Deren, Kenneth Anger, and Stan Brakhage. Vertov's *Enthusiasm* was lovingly restored by one of the founders of the Anthology Film Archives, the Austrian archivist and avant-garde filmmaker, Peter Kubelka. Vertov's writings—few of which had appeared in English during his lifetime—were translated into English in a piecemeal fashion from the early 1970s. Finally, in 1984, they appeared in a version of the Russian and French collection edited by Michelson (*Kino-Eye* 1984), one of the more highly regarded theorists of the American avant-garde. In 1987, the Harvard film historian Vlada Petric published his book-length shot-by-shot exegesis of *The Man with a Movie Camera*, which sought to place Vertov firmly within the avant-garde tradition (Petric). Where will we find our next use of Vertov? Citing Vertov's work as archetypal of the early modernist avant-garde is an undertaking that seems to have run its course. Vertov's formalism is rather basic in the light of what it, as a movement, and later structuralism were to become.

Seeing Vertov in the context of cinema history—at the moment of this writing, in this centenary of cinema itself—is somewhat more instructive. For Vertov was the product of a time when it was still just barely possible to avoid the neat categories which now divide film practice. He began his career very shortly after the establishment of Hollywood and the kind of mainstream studio filmmaking it inspired all over the world. When he rejected this mode, there was no clear definition of an alternative, of what Hollywood was not. John Grierson's articulation of the socially conscious nonfiction film, the big "D" documentary, came after Vertov's polemics and early work and owed something to them. But the documentary tradition proper had very little influence in shaping what Vertov was doing.

By the 1920s, avant-garde filmmaking was a tiny but discernible practice. Vertov might well have been aware of the Futurist avant-garde that predated his own work. He was likely aware of the European avant-garde filmmakers of the 1920s—although here, too, this would have most likely taken place after the formulation of his own aesthetic.⁶ And, unlike the European avant-garde filmmakers, Vertov had no desire to work outside the mainstream. From the beginning of his career to the end, he saw his aesthetic as the proper enterprise for all of the state's filmmaking. Indeed, that was the entire point of Vertov's work: to end the development of early cinema with a single pure practice, one that would stand as the only realization of the medium's potential as popular culture, political statement, and art. He was, not least of all in his own mind, the last gasp of cinema's invention, the most

sophisticated of its primitives. As such, he provides continual incentive to explore other cinematic paths not taken and, as we are deluged with new media, to suggest a model for the exploration of new moving image technologies.

However, to begin to use Vertov in this way, we must face one last time the political context in which he worked. In the post-Soviet world, that context is more than a little suspect. *The Man with a Movie Camera* is, along with everything else it is, a hymn of praise to a communist workers' paradise that was already being ridiculed in 1929 and would be a running joke inside and outside the Soviet Union for the next sixty years. The simple and horrible truth is that most of the people we see in the film would, very shortly, begin to suffer in Stalin's purges and the artificial famine he would create in the Ukraine during the 1930s. Their industries would be destroyed in World War II. If what we see in *The Man with a Movie Camera* appears to be a sunny day in the life of the revolution, we must view the film now with the realization that there remained very few days like it.

If there is anything redemptive in the work Vertov did for Stalin, it is perhaps that his filmmaking proved, in the end, to be antithetical to Stalin's political mission. The marginalization Vertov suffered in his later years was in some ways an inevitable vindication of his ideas. Under Stalin's reign, "life caught unawares" worked all too well. People not deliberately posed for the camera looked as desperate and distraught as they were. Nor could a highly centralized, dictatorial state encourage spontaneous mass participation in its "most important" art form: to do so would have been to subsidize not just an underground cinema but a reevaluation of all aspects of society through the images that had so faithfully recorded it. The proof of this came at last in 1991, when television news, videotapes, and all our other new instruments of "life caught unawares" were used as tools in the destruction of Stalin's much corrupted heirs.

What would Vertov have made of this moment? Here was a guinea pig of mechanical perception, a man who, thirty-five years before McLuhan used the phrase, was thinking of media as "the extensions of man" (McLuhan). Vertov editing footage of the civil war at the Moscow Cinema Committee was the prototype of the net surfer downloading bits and pieces of fragmented information. Vertov the filmmaker—and advocate of mass filmmaking—could well be thought of as a pioneer in the building of a system in which millions of people reconstruct those fragments, building personalized multimedia web-sites which are then made available to millions of others. Vertov the manifesto writer was, like so many writers today, trying to find the words for what all this meant and how it might be used for some greater good. Certainly, were Vertov alive today he would be pleased to see that the Cinema Eye has never been more potent—or busier. And he would agree that never in human history

have we so desperately needed to make peace between people and their machines.

Notes

1. For a firsthand history of the period see Viktor Shklovsky, *Mayakovsky and His Circle*, ed. and trans. Lily Feiler (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1972).
2. All quotations from Vertov's writings are my own translations; citations refer to corresponding passages in Vertov, *Kino-Eye*.
3. The statement was reportedly made by Lenin during a conversation with his Minister of Culture, Anatoli Lunacharsky, in 1922. It appears in a letter written by Lunacharsky in 1925.
4. Ruttmann appears to have been aware of Vertov's work prior to making *Berlin*. See Siegfried Kracauer's *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947), 185.
5. In the single projector venues in which the film was most often screened in the Soviet Union, this would have been the second time the audience saw the number one rising.
6. In a 1926 diary entry, for instance, Vertov discusses René Clair's 1924 film, *Paris qui dort* (*Kino-Eye* 163). He toured Western Europe in 1929 and again in 1931. In addition, Vertov's youngest brother, Boris Kaufman, worked as Jean Vigo's cameraman from 1929 to 1933.

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Paradise Regained

Sergei Eisenstein's *Que viva México!* as Ethnography

Joanne Hershfield

During my encounter with Mexico, it seemed to me to be, in all the variety of its contradictions, a sort of outward projection of all those individual lines and features which I carried and carry within me like a tangle of complexes.

SERGEI EISENSTEIN, *Immoral Memories: An Autobiography*

Introduction

There is a telling photograph of the Soviet director, Sergei Eisenstein, taken in Merida, Mexico, during the filming of his historical epic, *Que viva México!* (1932). A film cameraman stands in the foreground with his back to us, lining up a shot through his viewfinder. From the viewer's perspective, it appears that the shot will be composed along three planes extending vertically from the bottom of the film frame to the top: on the first plane, three white skulls are arranged in a horizontal row; Eisenstein sits on the ground above the skulls, and beyond him, on a third plane, stands a group of black-robed monks bearing a cross. While the shot as it appears in the film will not include the director, his presence, if not his body, permeates *Que viva México!*¹

Previous studies of Eisenstein's attempt to compose a film based on Mexican history have focused on the film's production history, on the relation