

From: THE ESSENTIAL CINEMA  
 ed. P. ADAMS SITNEY

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## From Magician To Epistemologist

Vertov's *The Man With A Movie Camera*

*I add, as well, that it is not circular reasoning to prove a cause by several known effects and then, conversely, to prove several other effects by this cause. And I have included both of those two meanings . . . in the following words: As the latter reasons are demonstrated by the first which are their cause, so these first reasons are conversely demonstrated by the latter which are their effects. Wherefore I should not thus be accused of having spoken ambiguously since I have explained myself in saying that Experience rendering the greater part of these effects very certain, the causes from which I deduce them serve not so much to prove as to explain them, but that they are proven by them. And I say that they serve not so much to prove rather than they serve not at all so as to make clear that each of these effects can also be proved by that cause, in case it is doubted, and that it has already been proven by other effects. So that I do not see how I could have used any other terms to make myself more clearly understood.*

—Descartes, Letter to Morin, July, 1638.

We are in Moscow, in January, 1935. A dozen men, suspending for a moment the contradictions and rivalries which oppose them in polemical cross-fire and tactical maneuver, are poised in the uneasy amity of a command performance. They are in fact the Class of 1925 and sit, surrounded by their juniors, for a portrait; the All-Union Creative Conference of Workers in Soviet Cinematography<sup>1</sup> recomposes in the attitudes of official concord for the still photographer (Fig. 13).

1. An account of this conference, called in celebration of the 15th anniversary of the Soviet film industry and from which Eisenstein emerged with a humiliating fourth-class award, is presented in Marie Seton's *Eisenstein: A Biography*, New York, n.d., pp. 330-50.

The photograph will instruct us of the general contours of an heroic era, projecting the topography of a culture which engendered that which we now know to be, in more than any vaguely metaphorical sense, a "language of cinema." The placing of these men, their attitudes, the trajectories of glances offered, exchanged, deflected, describe the interplay of character and sensibility which articulates a grand collective aspiration. This picture is an historic text; it demands a reading, in every which way: across, up, down, around, all the way through.\*

In the first row, substending, as it were, the presence and efforts of men such as Raisman, Trauberg, Romm, Donskoi, Yutkevitch, Beck-Nazarov, who form a second rank, are four masters: Pudovkin, Eisenstein, Tissé, Dovzhenko—prime animators of revolutionary cinema's first dozen years or so. The man peering at top left over the heads of his intermediary colleagues and just coming into view, smiling—as well he might—is Vassiliev who, together with a collaborator, has produced *Chapayev*, the film whose easy narrative flow and psychological inflection of a revolutionary hagiography has taken that year's honors and the most general official assent. Its success, and his, hover premonitorily in the air of this assembly, thickening it almost irresistibly with ironies and ambiguities.

Eisenstein, the session's embattled Chairman, known to friends in the authority of his achievement and international reputation—and the dignity of his thirty-seven years—as "The Old Man," sits in the center of the first row. He's clutching a briefcase containing, one would think, the elaborate notes and bibliography for an opening address whose brilliance, irony, and controlled intellectual paths were to bring his listeners to a pitch of fury, releasing from these talented and pressured men a massive and concerted lynching. He is for this moment, however, alive with a characteristic smile of generous delight in a colleague's success, attending wholly to the man standing at the left and half-turned from us in an attitude of entirely graceful vivacity. This man is Pudovkin, and, like the gifted and disciplined actor we know him in the widest range of film roles to be, he is at work charming and diverting the assembly.

The lean and elegant creature on Eisenstein's other side, bending toward us, poised and concentrated, is Tissé, the great cameraman and Eisenstein's lifelong friend and co-worker. His gaze slants to the right beyond the scene of action past the camera, through rather than towards things. It "pierces," as we say. Then, at an angle almost perpendicular to that gaze, as if far to the left, but, so far as one can see, looking at nothing in particular, travels another glance. It is Dovzhenko's. He is, as in all his pictures, beautiful; he rests, slightly slouched in an abandon of meditation, his person half-

\* It is the view of Jay Leyda that this photograph in which Eisenstein is wearing a decoration that is possibly the order of Lenin may have been made at a later date. The lines of force and balance of power inscribed within it are not, of course, modified by the change of date.

encircled by the sweep of Tissé's arm. Tissé's pure focused gaze and Dovzhenko's stare would seem—if this were possible—to cross but nowhere to meet. And this might be because indeed one is a stare, the other a gaze. Tissé's eyes, looking out upon the world, embrace another virtual scene somewhere between our space and his. Dovzhenko's look seems recollected back into itself. He smiles slightly—again as if to himself.

The juniors are involved in a general contraposto of body and focus whose traces will produce a tangle that must drive a reader to distraction—or to pedantry. Eisenstein's eyes, though fixed upon the moving object, must see Pudovkin, his old adversary who has been, in fact, addressing himself just slightly past him to that tangle of the general assembly. . . .

Two men, however, are missing from this dialectical icon. Kuleshov, the pioneer of montage and once the teenage teacher of these men, is nowhere to be seen. We do nevertheless know him to have spoken from the floor in a splendidly candid and courageous defense of Eisenstein.<sup>2</sup> The arena of public honor and debate, contracting in the Stalinist climate, was generating conflicts and realignments by the second; pressures falsified positions. We must suppose that by this time Kuleshov was somewhat removed from the public scene, and with him that one artist most problematic in his radicalism for even the greatest of his peers: Dziga Vertov. Vertov could have, as we shall see, no place in this picture.

We do, of course, have pictures of him, and the really speaking likeness is one which has him arrested in mid-air, leaping or pirouetting, delivering him to us as a body in violent movement, immobilized in what the stilled presence of motion suggests might be a "frame." It projects the preoccupation spelled out in the pseudonym which replaced, at the very threshold of his working life, the family name of Denis Kaufman. Dziga Vertov, translated, is "Spinning Top." That photograph, taken in maturity, is of course the late image of these early thoughts:

Nineteen-eighteen. I moved to Gnezdnikovskiy No. 7.

Did a risky jump for a slow-motion camera.

Didn't recognize my face on the screen. My thoughts were revealed on my face—irresolution, vacillation and firmness (a struggle within myself), and again the joy of victory.

First thought of the Kino-Eye as a world perceived without a mask, as a world of naked truth (that cannot be hidden).<sup>3</sup>

That "world of naked truth" is, in fact, the space upon which epistemological inquiry and the cinematic consciousness converge in dialectical mimesis. And Vertov is its great discoverer. His work is paradoxically concrete, the original and paradigmatic instance of

2. *Ibid.*, p. 338.

3. From *The Notebooks of Dziga Vertov*, trans. Val Telberg, from *Iskusstvo Kino*, 3, 1957, and reprinted in Harry M. Ceduld, *Film Makers on Film Making*, Indiana, 1967.

"an attempt to film, in slow motion, that which has been, owing to the manner in which it is perceived in natural speed, not absolutely unseen but missed by sight, subject to oversight. An attempt to approach slowly and calmly that original intensity which is not given in appearance, but from which things and processes have none the less in turn derived."<sup>4</sup>

The evolution of his work, and of the master work with which I'm now concerned, renders insistently concrete, as in another dialectical icon, that philosophical phantasm of the reflexive consciousness, the eye seeing, apprehending itself through its constitution of the world's visibility.

We are dealing certainly with a very special case, a film with a forty-year history of the most generally distrustful and hostile reception and of systematic critical neglect. The hostility and distrust are not, of course, unique, but the sustained neglect, the shared distrust and bewilderment of some generally perceptive and qualified spectators, the totally evasive and inadequate literature on *The Man with the Movie Camera* give us pause. Soviet film is, after all, one of the most elaborately and swiftly documented and consecrated areas in the history of the medium. It is true, of course, that much remains to be done and to be redone, to be rescued from the damaging mold of piety, but the absence of close and serious attention makes this film something of a very special case. Shoved hastily and distractedly into the ashean of film history, it has been left to tick away, through four decades, like a time bomb.

Here is one contemporary judgment of the film, published in the December, 1931, issue of *Close-up*, two years after the initial release in the Soviet Union. Offered by Jay Leyda as a focus for the film's representation in *Kino*, it is an excellent index of general reaction.

Theorists mostly love their theories more than a father loves an only child. . . . Vertov also has waged fierce, vehement and desperate battles with his material and his instruments (reality and the film camera) to give practical proofs of his ideas. In this he has failed. He had failed already in the era of the silent film by showing hundreds of examples of most cunning artistry in turning acrobatic masterpieces of poetic jigsaw, brilliant *conjuring* (italics mine) of filmic association—but never a rounded work, never a clear, preceding line. His great efforts of strength in relation to detail did not leave him breath for the whole. His arabesques totally covered the ground plan, his fugues destroyed every melody.<sup>5</sup>

This rhetoric and imagery, though interesting, are not my immediate concern. The judgment most significantly echoes that of Eisenstein; and in a manner which induces reflection on one of the

4. The metaphor of this formulation, by Gérard Granel, of the phenomenological project and method is discussed in my previous essay, "Toward Snow," *Artforum*, June, 1971. For Granel's text, presented here in my own translation, see *Le Sens du Temps et de la Perception chez Husserl*, Paris, 1968, p. 108.

5. Jay Leyda, *Kino: A History of the Russian and Soviet Film*, London, 1960, p. 251.

most interesting and knotty critical issues in Soviet film history and esthetics: the relation between Eisenstein and Vertov. For Eisenstein, *The Man with the Movie Camera* is a compendium of "formalist jackstraws and unmotivated camera mischief," and its use of slow motion is unfavorably compared with Jean Epstein's in *The Fall of the House of Usher*. It is compared, rather, with that which had been reported of Epstein's film in the press, since Eisenstein admits, in what must have been an impatient afterthought, that he had not yet seen the film! Attempting to account for the naked and disingenuous belligerency of those remarks,<sup>6</sup> one recalls Eisenstein's late strictures on his own first mature work, the film closest in style and tone to Vertov's. *Strike* he professed to see, from the vantage point of maturity, as infected with "the childhood disease of leftism," a metaphor of esthetic formalism borrowed from Leninist polemical literature.

But here is a third view, that of Leyda himself, our senior and in every way exemplary scholar of the period, advanced with a characteristic scrupulousness: "My memory of *The Man with the Movie Camera* is not reliable; I have not seen it since it happened to be, in 1930, the first Soviet film I saw. It was such a dazzling experience that it took two or three other Soviet films with normal 'stories' to convince me that all Soviet films were not compounded of such intricate camera pyrotechnics. But I hope to be forgiven for not bringing away any very clear critical idea as I reeled out of the Eighth Street Playhouse—I was even too stunned to sit through it again. The apparent purpose of the film was to show the breadth and precision of the camera's recording ability. But Vertov and his cameraman-brother, Mikhail Kaufman, were not content to show any simple vocabulary of film practice; the cameraman is made an heroic participant in the currents of Soviet life. He and his methods

6. They occur in Eisenstein's important theoretical essay "The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram" written in 1929. Discussing the style of the Kabuki theater and its "unprecedented slowing down of all movement," he goes on to say, ". . . here we see disintegration of the process of movement, viz. slow motion. I have heard of only one example of a thorough application of this method, using the technical possibility of the film with a compositionally reasoned plan. It is usually employed with some purely pictorial aim, such as the 'submarine kingdom' in *The Thief of Bagdad*, or to represent a dream, as in *Zoetigora* (Dovzhenko's first film). Or, more often, it is used simply for formalist jackstraws and unmotivated camera mischief as in Vertov's *The Man with the Movie Camera*. The more commendable example appears to be in Jean Epstein's *La Chute de la Maison Usher*—at least according to the press reports. In this film, normally acted emotions filmed with a speeded-up camera are said to give unusual emotional pressure by their unrealistic slowness on the screen. If it be borne in mind that the effect of an actor's performance on the audience is based on its identification by each spectator, it will be easy to relate both examples (the Kabuki play and the Epstein film) to an identical causal explanation. The intensity of perception increases as the didactic process of identification proceeds more easily along a disintegrated action.

Even instruction in handling a rifle can be hammered into the tightest motor-mentality among a group of raw recruits if the instructor uses a "break-down" method." Eisenstein, *Film Form, Essays in Film Theory*, ed. and trans. Jay Leyda, Cleveland, Ohio, pp. 43-44.

are treated by Vertov in his most fluid montage style, establishing large patterns of sequences: the structure resembles that of *Kino-Eye*, with a succession of 'themes'—the audience, the working day, marriage, birth, death, recreation—each with a whirling galloping climax; but the execution of the two films, separated by less than five years, are worlds apart. The camera observation in *Kino-Eye* was alert, surprising, but never eccentric. Things and actions were 'caught', but less for the catching's sake than for the close observation of the things themselves. In *The Man with the Movie Camera* all the stunts that can be performed by a cameraman armed with Debrrie or hand-camera and by a film-cutter armed with the boldness of Vertov and Svilova can be found in this full-to-bursting film, recognized abroad for what it really is, an avant-garde film, though produced by VUFKU, a state trust.<sup>7</sup> And Leyda's later viewing at the Parisian Cinémathèque confirmed his initial impressions of brilliance.

Now all these texts deserve a closer reading than I shall give them: they raise problems directly or implicitly of all sorts: historiographic, stylistic, esthetic, political. Leyda's estimation of the nature of Vertov's development from *Kino-Eye* on, the precise similarities and differences of style between earlier and later films demand revision, but the films demand a finer, closer reading than anyone could at that time give. *The Man with the Movie Camera* was simply unavailable for study within the Eastern zone. Yet here is a film, available for rental in this country from a major distributor of 16 millimeter work, and obviously, for all practical critical purposes, just as "unavailable." That double circumstance tells us that its author does indeed inhabit another space: it is an index of its strangeness as a filmic object.

Thinking again of Eisenstein, one is led to inquire whether Vertov's masterwork does not constitute a redefinition of that "intellectual cinema" which had so haunted Eisenstein's imagination. We know that his career produced not only an *oeuvre*, but that shadow *oeuvre* of unrealized projects, its poles defined by the projected filmic versions of *Capital* and of Joyce's *Ulysses*. One might, in fact, see them as positing a shift from the articulation of a comprehensive and dialectical view of the world to the exploration of the terrain of consciousness itself. I will suggest that it is Vertov who effects that shift, and who maps that terrain in *The Man with the Movie Camera*. Suggesting that, I then suppose that only a shock of recognition, a shudder of remembrance and perhaps of reawakened aspiration long repressed, could elicit this bitter triviality from the intellectually powerful and generous man we've watched beaming so disarmingly at Pudovkin, his old antagonist.

Vertov begins his career in 1919 with a death verdict pronounced on all motion pictures made until then. He is making no exceptions

7. Leyda, *Kino*, pp. 251-52. Leyda has, quite understandably, exaggerated the film's reputation abroad.

and redefines cinema as capturing "the feel of the world" through the substitution of the camera, that "perfectible eye," for the human eye, that "imperfectible one." For Vertov, then, the distinction or conflict between what was known as the "art film" and any other kind of cinema then being made was totally without meaning. He relocated the frontier between mimesis and "the feel of the world," recalling to us Shklovsky's command: "We live as if coated with rubber; We must recover the world." So too, in the preparation of *Enthusiasm*, his first sound film, he entirely redefined the problems and possibilities created by the new parameter, shifting the focus of research from the borderline separating synchronous and asynchronous sound to that which distinguishes the fictive from the evidential, the composed from the concrete.

Vertov's disdain of the mimetic, his concern with technique and process, with their extensions and revelation, stamp him as a member of the Constructivist generation. The shared ideological concern with the role of his art as the agent of human perfectibility, of a social transformation which issues in a transformation of consciousness in the most complete and intimate sense, the certainty of accession to the "world of naked truth" are grounded in the acceptance, the affirmation of, the radically synthetic quality of film-making in the stylistics of montage.

*Kino-Eye* is a victory against time. It is a visual link between phenomena separated from one another in time. *Kino-Eye* gives a condensation of time, and also its decomposition.

... *Kino-Eye* avails itself of all the current means of recording ultra-rapid motion, micro-cinematography, reverse motion, multiple exposure, foreshortening, etc., and does not consider these as tricks, but as normal processes of which wide use must be made.

*Kino-Eye* makes use of all the resources of montage, drawing together and linking the various points of the universe in a chronological or anachronistic order as one wills, by breaking, if necessary, with the laws and customs of the construction of cine-thing.

In introducing itself into the apparent chaos of life, the *Kino-Eye* tries to find in life itself an answer to the question it poses; to find the correct and necessary line among the millions of phenomena which relate to the theme.<sup>8</sup>

The montage style, a refinement and extension of the heritage of Griffith and Kuleshov, was original in the intensity of its refinement and in the imaginative power of that extension to every parameter of the cinema. For Vertov, as for Eisenstein—inheritors, as well, of the last great philosophical system of the West—the responsibilities implicit in this double birthright were felt as weighty and imperious. As Bazin was later to hypostasize his ontology of film into an ontology of existential freedom (rejecting, as he did so, the "tricks" of montage), so for the prime theorists of Soviet cinema, montage thinking became "inseparable

8. Dziga Vertov, *Kino-Eye: Lecture II*, in Geduld, *Film Makers*, p. 102.

from dialectical thinking as a whole." The process of intellection elicited in the experience of the montage unit is thus hypostasized into the triadic rehearsal of the dialectic.

To survey or somewhat more concretely to grasp the sense in which Vertov shares the concerns and strategies of Constructivism, one does best, I think, to defer thinking about his employment of Gans and Rodchenko as collaborators and to consider rather—initially, at least—the possible relation of this particular filmic object to another object of the period, as strange and bewildering in its time, as controversial—though not, of course, as universally condemned. This is Tatlin's model for The Monument for the Third International, made, as Shklovsky remarked, of "iron, glass and revolution."

I have, in quite another context, discussed the manner in which Tatlin, caught in the dialectic of the "esthetic" and the "functional," moves into the real space of function while preserving the esthetic character of sculpture, thereby initiating a movement of transgression, bewildering in the extreme to its beholders and manifest in the contradictions and ambiguities of the contemporary debate over the nature and qualities of The Monument.<sup>9</sup> Confronting this work, those beholders produced a map of intellectual life in the Soviet Union of the early '20s: Punin sees it as functional, as an "organic synthesis of the principles of architecture, sculpture, and painting;" Ehrenburg, as an expression of the dynamic tomorrow, surrounded by the poverty of the present. For Trotsky, it is a non-functional intrusion a luxury in the devastated city of the immediately post-revolutionary period, and for Shklovsky, of course, a formal structure with its own immanent logic, its own semantics.

This triadic structure, multi-functional in design, turning at three different and simultaneous speeds (encompassing the full temporal scale of day, month, and year), receiving and emitting information, bulletins and manifestoes, projecting film from a screen and writing weather forecasts in light upon the heavens, is "based," as Malevich remarked, "upon the Cubist formula" as much as *The Man with the Movie Camera* is grounded in the technique of montage.<sup>10</sup> Both structures propose an hyperbolic intensification of those techniques, insisting upon the materiality of the object and upon its architectonics as the core of interest. It is for these reasons and perhaps insofar as both structures do, in their polyvalence and circularity, more literally revolve about a core, that they seem—in a common movement of transgression—to converge upon the definition of a style, a program, a "semantics" of construction. And here is Vertov's adumbration of a "culture of materials:"

9. Annette Michelson, *Robert Morris: An Aesthetics of Transgression*, for the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1969, pp. 71-75.

10. The Malevich text pertinent to this discussion and quoted in extenso on page 73 of Michelson's *Robert Morris* catalogue is excerpted from Kasimir S. Malevich, *Essays on Art: 1915-1928*, trans. Xenia Glowacki, Copenhagen, 1968, p. 72.

To make a montage is to organize pieces of film, which we call the frames, into a cine-thing. It means to write something cinematic with the recorded shots. It does not mean to select pieces, to make "scenes" (deviations of a theatrical character), nor does it mean to arrange pieces according to subtitles (deviations of a literary character).

Every Kino-Eye production is mounted on the very day that the subject (theme) is chosen, and this work ends only with the launching of the film into circulation in its definitive form. In other words, montage takes place from the beginning to the end of production.<sup>11</sup>

Vertov then proceeds, in this second lecture on *Kino-Eye*, to articulate the stages of montage production involved in "Evaluation of Documents," "directly or indirectly related to the chosen theme (manuscripts, various objects, film clippings, photographs, newspaper clippings, books), the plan of shots which is the focus of Montage Synthesis, and General Montage, the synthesis of the observations noted on the film under the direction of the machine-eye. Proceeding to the discussion of composition through organization of "intervals," upon the movement between frames and the proportions of these pieces as they relate to one another, taking into account relations of planes (small and large), relations of foreshortenings, relations of movements within the frame of each piece, relations of lights and shades, relations of speeds of recording. This theory, which has been called the 'theory of intervals' was launched by the *kinoks* in their manifest *WE*, written as early as 1919. In practice, this theory was most brilliantly illustrated in *The Eleventh Year* and especially in *The Man with the Movie Camera*."<sup>12</sup>

And "All who love their art seek the essence of technique to show that the eye does not see—to show truth, the microscope and telescope of time, the *negative of time*, the possibility of seeing without frontiers or distances; the tele-eye, sight in spontaneity, a kind of *Communist decoding of reality*. Almost all art film workers were enemies of the *Kinoks*. This was normal; it meant they would have to reconsider their *métier*. *Kino-Pravda* was made with materials as a house is built with bricks."

In 1924, Vertov made the film we know as *Kino-Glaz* or *Kino-Eye*, the first of a projected series. The *Kino-Pravda* series, his first major work, had involved him for some years in the production of short documents or newsreels on the widest variety of themes. *Kino-Glaz* is a didactic work, centered on episodes which articulate major preoccupations of the young Soviet regime: it deals with the manufacture and distribution of bread, the processing and distribution of meat, celebrates the constructions of youth camps and discusses the problem of alcoholism.

It introduces Vertov's formal adoption of the articulation of film-making technique as his subject. It begins, as well, to suggest what

11. See Vertov, *Kino-Eye: Lecture II*, in Ceduld, p. 102.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 103-105.

we may understand by "the negative of time" as a key "to the Communist decoding of reality." Looking for "the negative of time," we find it in the use of reverse motion as analytic strategy.

It is near the beginning of *Kino-Glaz* that we first see a peasant woman on her way to the market to buy meat. We next see her, walking backwards, propelled by the reversal of that sequence, whence she came. The processing and distribution of meats is then recapitulated in reverse, as well.

Here are the numbered intertitles of that sequence:

23. Kino-Eye pushes time backwards
24. Only to meat market and freezer
25. Beef 20 seconds ago
26. Beef gets its intestines back
27. Skin is returned to him
28. Resurrection of the bull

And later in the film, from a Pioneer's diary, title 64: "If time went backwards the bread would return to the bakery." And the film then continues with a recapitulation of bread distribution and manufacture.

It is, however, essential that we note the sequence separating these two recapitulations in reverse action: it is entirely devoted to the presentation of a magician, and its intertitles read as follows:

56. Film Eye about a Chinese magician
57. Gui Yuan works for his bread
58. Behold
59. Observe, observe, the whole hand
60. Observe the hand, observe the hole
61. Nothing—nothing
62. Now, make one live mouse

The transition, then, between the two reversals of action is the image of the magician. Vertov is presenting him, of course, as a worker, someone who earns his bread by the creation of illusion, that worker whose prestidigitation is perhaps closest in effect to that of the filmmaker. We shall meet with the magician once again in the paradigmatically reflexive film in which the processes of filmmaking, editing, and projection will be revealed and assimilated, through constant and elaborate parallel montage, to the processes and functions of labor. If the filmmaker is, like the magician, a manufacturer of illusions, he can, unlike the prestidigitator and in the interests of instruction of a heightening of consciousness, destroy illusion by that other transcendently magical procedure, the reversal of time by the inversion of action. He can develop, as it were, "the negative of time" for "the Communist decoding of reality." This thematic interplay of magic, illusion, labor, filmic techniques and strategy, articulating a theory of film as epistemological inquiry, is the complex central core around which Vertov's greatest work develops. I want, therefore, to suggest that *Kino-Glaz* directly articu-

lates in a remarkably subtle and complex manner a polemical statement made the very same year. Extracted from the stenographic record of his speech made during a colloquium on Art and Everyday Life, it was published for the first time in Moscow in 1966.

We raise our protest against the collusion of the director as enchanter with the public submissive to enchantment.

Only consciousness can fight the sway of magic.

Only consciousness can form a man of firm opinion and solid conviction.

We need conscious men, not an unconscious mass submissive to any passing suggestion.

Long live the class consciousness of healthy men with eyes and ears to see and hear with.

Away with the perfumed veil of kisses, murder, doves and prestidigitation.

Long live the class vision.

Long live the cinema eye.

Reverse motion, first used in *Kino-Glaz* to illuminate process, will come to occupy a privileged place in a work dedicated to the creation of a dialectically inflected consciousness. It will, in fact, develop into the most personally characteristic and central visual trope of Vertov's mature work, the formal pivot of his epistemological discourse. That development is, in its complexity and coherence, unique within the history of film, Turning for some analogous example of the strength and organicity with which that central trope will infuse his mature work, one reaches for the complex image clusters which articulate the later plays of Shakespeare.

The notion of film as language, the concern with the linguistic aspects and analogues of film structure, is, as we know, one of the dominant characteristics of Soviet filmmakers and theoreticians of the heroic period. The hyperbolic intensification and growth of montage style with its attendant metaphoric thrust, the manner in which film after film—from *Strike* through Trauberg's *China Express*—tends towards the elaboration of a central metaphoric cluster, testify to the importance and the depth of a concern natural in men living close to the sources of modern linguistics and of formalist criticism in the work of Shklovsky, Brik, Jakobson. And it is, of course, a sure sign of the times that Eisenstein's sustained concern with these problems, his attempt to extend and refine upon earlier formulations in the light of recent anthropological studies, should have triggered the fury of the Conference of 1935.

*The Man with the Movie Camera* is, among other things, a massive testimonial to this concern, sharing, hyperbolizing the use of metaphor, simile, synecdoche, rhyming images, parataxis—and incurring, above all, the reproach of a grammatical inconsistency one might better term a strategic use of anacoluthia.

The trope developed in *Kino-Glaz*, quintessential in the evolution of Vertov's style, flowering in the film of 1929, is the cinematic em-

bodiment through reversal technique of the figure of speech known in classical rhetoric as *hysteron proteron*, that figure by which what should come last is put first, positioning or arranging things in the reverse of their natural or rational order. (An example, extracted from the *Oxford Shorter Dictionary* and therefore properly biblical, is: "Take ye, eat ye, this is my body;" the injunction to eat preceding the presentation of the substance, its condition. Another would be Enobarbus' description in Act III, scene 8, of *Antony* and *Cléopâtre*: "Th'Antoniad, the Egyptian admiral, with all their sixty, fly, and turn the rudder.") Action reversed, then, "the negative of time," will function as a prime agent of Vertov's structural and conceptual projects. We shall be seeing its consummate development in the admitted dazzlement of *The Man with the Movie Camera*.

Something of great moment was, however, to occur between the making of the two films. Vertov saw, in April of 1926, the first film of the young René Clair, *Paris Qui Dort* (known in this country as *The Crazy Ray*), and the experience was upsetting. He records in his journal the mixed feelings it elicited, the sense of delight mixed with the exasperation felt upon encountering the work one wanted—one had indeed planned—to make oneself.

*Paris Qui Dort* is a film about a rather amiably mad scientist who immobilizes all of Paris in a trance of sleep with a magical paralyzing ray machine. Only the handsome young guard of the Eiffel Tower and his guests—an airplane pilot and four passengers—and the scientist's pretty daughter are exempt, through the altitude of the tower to which the ray cannot penetrate. The last quarter of this charming work is animated by the series of variations played, in a shower of gentle gags, upon the basic techniques of stop-motion acceleration, deceleration, animation. The sustained climax, involving the subjection of an entire city to the erratic control of the ray, is extraordinary. A sort of electric charge or thrill is produced by the instants of freeze and of release. This, of course, is the aspect of filmic experience most characteristic of the editor's experience of film, and one most stubbornly resistant to the effort of verbal description. It is in so far as Clair and Vertov are engaged in the direct manipulation of filmic process that their finest work resists description. To describe a movement is difficult, to describe the instant of arrest and of release, of reversal, of movement, is something else again; it is to confront that thrill on the deepest level of filmic enterprise, to recognize the privileged character of the medium as being in itself the promise of an incomparable, an un hoped for, grasp upon the nature of causality.

These instants of complex magic—Clair's arrest of boats in their slow cruising on the Seine (slow to the point of being rendered visibly in motion *through* that arrest), the paralysis and vivification of whole city crowds, the resuscitation of figures, frozen, unsupported in a slouch of sleep—all deserve their Ode, must have, in any case, an essay of their own. . . .

Remarkable in *Paris Qui Dort* are the quality and aspect of the Parisian streets, intimately reminiscent of the photographs Atget would continue to make until his death in 1927 and of which Walter Benjamin remarked:

It has quite justly been said of [Atget] that he photographed [the streets of Paris] like scenes of crime. The scene of a crime, too, is deserted; it is photographed for the purpose of establishing evidence. With Atget, photographs become standard evidence for historical occurrences and acquire a hidden political significance. They demand a specific kind of approach; free-floating contemplation is not appropriate to them. They stir the viewer; he feels challenged by them in a new way. At the same time picture magazines begin to put up signposts for him, right ones or wrong ones, no matter. For the first time, captions have become obligatory. And it is clear that they have an altogether different character than the title of a painting. The directives which the captions give to those looking at pictures in illustrated magazines soon become even more exact and more imperative in the film, where the meaning of each single picture appears to be prescribed by the sequence of all preceding ones.<sup>13</sup>

Those deserted streets will reappear in the opening section of *The Man with the Movie Camera*, the greatest of the "city documentaries," the silent film from which Vertov resolutely excluded titles. Atget's concern with the space of places and of objects and with the virtual spaces and images of reflection will also reappear in Vertov's shops and their display windows. And the window pane will be the plane on and through which, in reflection, the space outside of city landscape and its figures will be confounded with the space inside and its mannequins. Vertov will carry the conceit of the glass as both camera and projector to its dazzling extreme in a sequence in which the glass of a revolving door will project, in its swing of 180 degrees, its panning image of the neighborhood surrounding it.

Vertov had planned to make a film of *Moscow Asleep* two years prior to his encounter with the Clair film, and of course that general idea is rendered in the opening shots of the city, her streets empty, her shutters and blinds opening, her machinery set in motion as her people stir to life again in the morning. Both Vertov and Clair do build to a finale through a coda of Rossini-like acceleration. Clair's scientist, however, with his endearingly simple, freaky-looking little machine, irresistibly suggests to us, as well he might to Vertov, a metaphor for the movie maker and his camera, an invention roughly

13. See Benjamin's celebrated essay, "The Work of Art in the Era of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn, New York, 1969. I reserve discussion of Benjamin's views on photography and upon cinema for another essay, pointing out on this occasion his view that the "resources of (the camera's) lowerings and liftings, its interruptions and isolations, its extensions and accelerations, its enlargements and reductions . . . introduce us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses."

the contemporary of both the tower itself and that other dream machine, the aeroplane. It remained, then, for Vertov to draw the conclusion of which that metaphor is a sort of premise, to work out, as it were, the consequences of that insight.

Supposing this, I will suppose as well that the encounter with *Paris Qui Dort* was more than frustrating; it was catalytic, sharpening and confirming Vertov's epistemological orientation, stimulating the more systematic deployment of the filmic techniques and strategies. The multiple themes of *The Man with the Movie Camera*—the life of man from birth through marriage and death, the progress of a day, the making and projection of a film—will be articulated not only through the use of metaphor, synecdoche, simile, comparison, rhyming images but through the freeze-frame, acceleration, split-frame, superimposition, all the "anomalies" of his own inventory, and many more.

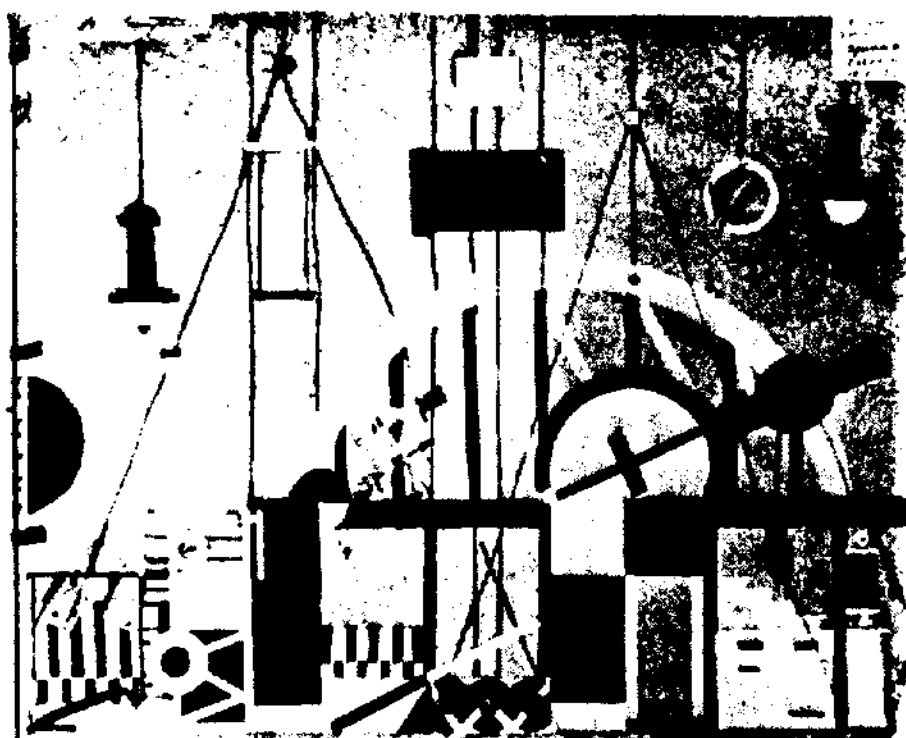
The result, articulated most powerfully through the presentation of the filmmaking editing and projection process, is a revelation, an exposure of the terms and dynamics of cinematic illusionism. And this it is—and not the speed, complexity, formal virtuosity, "obscurity"—that produced the shock, the scandal, the bewilderment in its beholders. It is the manner in which Vertov questions the most immediately powerful and sacred aspect of cinematic experience, disrupting systematically the process of identification and participation, generating at each moment of the film's experience a crisis of belief. In a sense most subtle and complex, he was, Bazin to the contrary, one of those directors "who put their faith in the image;" that faith was, however, accorded to the image seen, recognized as an image and the condition of that faith or recognition, the consciousness, the subversion through consciousness of cinematic illusionism.

Thirty years after the invention of the medium, four years after Eisenstein's inaugural master-work of the Revolutionary period,<sup>14</sup> Vertov had produced a film which, taking cinematic consciousness as its theme, defined in a stroke the outermost limits of his art, that art par excellence of this century and its revolution. How many bold and innovative filmic enterprises by gifted and energetic men might not look somewhat conservative, if not regressive, in comparison? Vertov had thus produced an impossible situation, a situation hardly to be borne. Or to be borne only in the rigidity of shock, dealt with through the reflex of exclusion, the *cri du coeur* which speaks the idiom of invective.

We now want, however, a closer view of Vertov's work, some knowledge of his strategies. Here is a brief and partial inventory:

1. *The continual reminder of the presence of the screen as a surface.* As in the repeated, simultaneous movement into the depth of its illusionist projection and out towards the spectator of the trams, a kind of push-and-pull which coexist in a virtual stasis, and neu-

14. *Strike* was made in 1925.

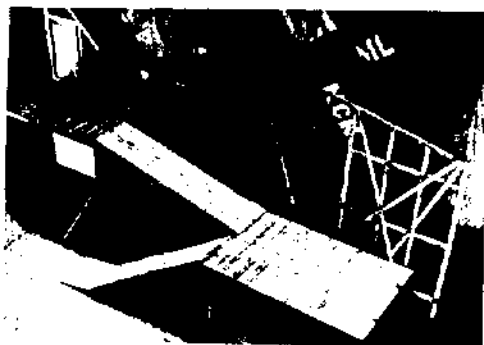


S.M. Eisenstein, drawing for a stage setting, projected production of *Heartbreak House*, Meyerhold Theater, 1922.



Luibav Popova, poster for *The Earth*, Meyerhold Theater, 1922.





Ljubov Popova, poster for *The Magnificent Cirkold*, Meyerhold Theater, 1922. 3.



S.M. Eisenstein, frame enlargement from *Strike*, 1924. 4.



El Lissitzky, design for a speaker's platform, 1920. 7.



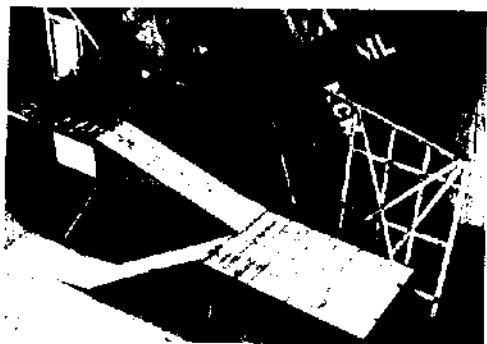
S.M. Eisenstein, *Lenin in October*, 1927.



S.M. Eisenstein, frame enlargement from *Battleship Potemkin*, 1924. 5.



S.M. Eisenstein, frame enlargement from *Battleship Potemkin*, 1924. 6.



Leibov Popeva, poster for *The Magnificent Cuckold*, Meyerhold Theater, 1922. 3.



S.M. Eisenstein, frame enlargement from *Sirike*, 1924. 4.



El Lissitzky, design for a speaker's platform, 1920. 7.



S.M. Eisenstein, *Lenin in October*, 1927.



S.M. Eisenstein, frame enlargement from *Battleship Potemkin*, 1925. 5.



S.M. Eisenstein, frame enlargement from *Battleship Potemkin*, 1924. 6.



Verlton, Alan With a Movie Camera, 1939. The cutting  
press.

19.



Verlton, Alan With a Movie Camera, 1939. A snap of time  
1939.

18.



20.



Robert  
Mouch  
Three pl  
church.

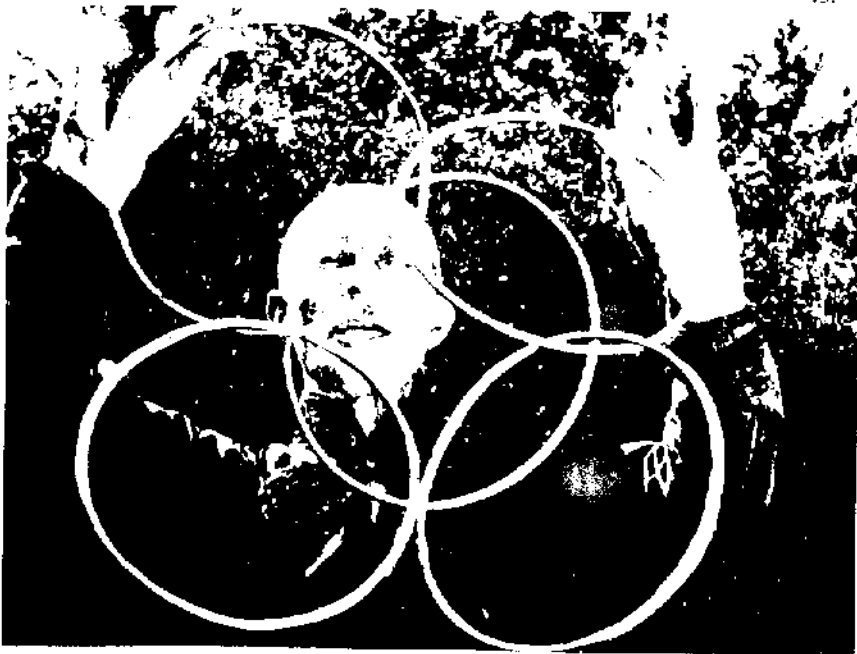


Two views of the Magician in Dziga Vertov's *Man With a Movie Camera*, 1929.

14.



Rene Clair, *Paris Qui Dort*, 1924.

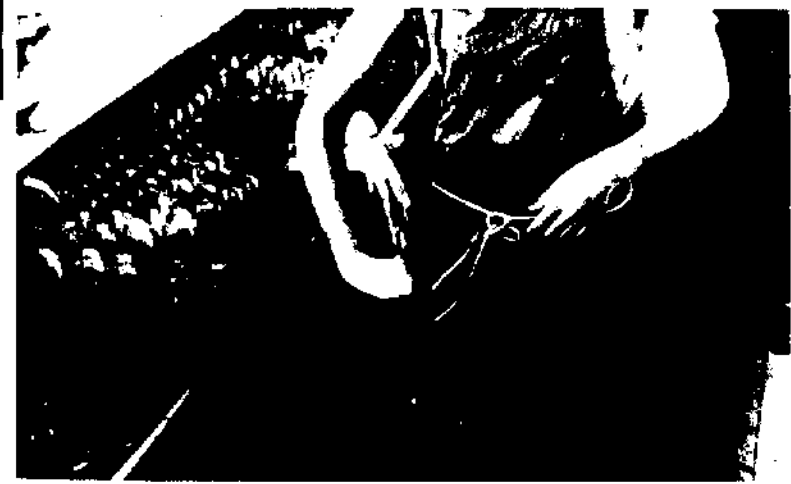


15.



Eugene Atget, a photograph of a street in Paris.

17.



*Monchelle*. Monchetti, pushed by her father.



Mo  
pha  
Mo  
wor



*Mouchette* phases Mouchette bumper

*Mouchette*. Mouchette sits with her father.



*Mouchette*. She gives him her pay.



*Mouchette*. She walks into the crowd at the fair.



*Mouchette* watches



*Mouchette.* The purchasing of a token.



*Mouchette.* Two phases of a shot: Mouchette receives the token.



Two views of the Inv:  
(Photos: Michael Chik)



tralizing one another, tend to pull one's eye back to the screen's surface, their point of encounter.

2. *The intrusion of animation techniques into the action.* Our magician appears once more, but suddenly, as if conjured up by another magician, another magic. This apparition is followed by another, that of carousel horses quickly coming into view on the carousel which has been presented without them. We then see a trick of magic performed by animation of inanimate objects. The magician's appurtenances are animated by the filmmaker, who has taken the magician's place or function. After this, the layout of a poster, performed by animation magic, once again, and we focus on the poster, whose image of an athlete leads us into the slow motion of the sport sequences.

3. *The alternation within one large sequence of slow and "normal" speeds.* In these sports sequences we see athletes performing, in slow motion, sometimes arrested, and in normal speed as well. We also see spectators watching (them) in intercut sequences. They are, it would seem, looking at what we see. There is, at least, as in all montage sequences of this sort, the implication of a spectacle shared by filmed spectator and spectator of the film. They are seen, however, in a setting which implies as well an integral space which contains them and the athletes, and their activity of looking is shot at normal speed, while we see the athletes performing in slower speed. The implication of shared spectacle is therefore subverted as one is made conscious of this disjunction.

4. *The subversion and restoration of filmic illusion leading to distend and contract the filmic image.* As in the penultimate sequence in which we are constantly alternating between the image of the cyclist racing and the image of the theater auditorium containing the stage containing the screen upon which the image is projected. The oscillation between illusion experienced and illusion revealed accelerates in the final coda of the film.

5. *The subversion of the cinematic illusion, through processes of distortion and/or abstraction.* These involve the use of the split screen which will multiply images in repetitive patterns (as with the trams), impose the abstraction of visual gags (the image of the athlete exercising with dumbbells, converted into a trunkless, many-limbed monster) and, most importantly, arrest—through a process of multiplication or opposition or superimposition of spaces—of the temporal flow which generates the illusion. This is involved, most interestingly, in the technique of superimposition and deserves some particular study, though I would propose the work of Stan Brakhage as an evidently richer field for this particular investigation.

6. *The process of intellection so constantly solicited by the complex structure, the entire texture of this most assertively edited film.* This is the most constantly used distancing technique.

It is, however, the reversal of order and of action, the hysteron



Anthology Film Archives Selection Committee (left to right, Ken Kelman, James Broughton, P. Adams Sitney, Jonas Mekas, Peter Kurlka. (Photo: Stephen Shore.)



proteron which, as Vertov's pivotal strategy, most strongly solicits our attention. One thing is plain: the manner in which the use of that trope has evolved since the making of *Kino-Glaz*. In the earlier film it is employed straightforwardly, for directly didactic purposes: simple reverse motion sends the peasant woman backwards through the streets, the bull back through dismemberment to resurrection, as though by magic. In *The Man with the Movie Camera*, the figure is employed in a manner far more complex, refined, varied, heightened. Applied very seldom in the manner of *Kino-Glaz* (an exception would be the reordering of a chess set back to its initial position on the board), it is sometimes even difficult to detect—as in the sequence of a locomotive moving either so quickly or so slowly that we deduce its inversion from other elements in the image—from the movement of human figures at the periphery of the screen. It is used metaphorically, as in the swift and somewhat humorously reversed orientation of the telephoto lens which intervenes between sequences showing marriage and divorce bureaux—as if to intimate that marriage is another process, and therefore, reversible. Here, though, are other instances:

The film contains, as we know, an image of the life cycle—in which mourning (the image of a mother grieving, weeping over a tomb) precedes the funeral procession of the young hero.

One sees the railway train roaring toward one, and later the cameraman and the camera on the track, the level from which that shot was filmed. Or one sees, emerging from a mine shaft, a worker steering a coal wagon, shot at a tilt. He passes, and one sees the cameraman prone on the ground, filming him.

The shot of an elevator moving up, then down, is followed by the shot of the cameraman on the ground filming. This second shot, filmed from the elevator cage in motion, causes the cameraman, standing stationary on the landing, to appear in vertical motion.

It is above all in the detailed elaboration of the processes of filming and of editing, projection and viewing that Vertov has seized upon the trope as a master strategy, elevating it to the function of a radical innovation. These sequences, initiated about halfway through the film, begin with the summer promenade of elegant ladies from a peasant market in a carriage followed by the cameraman who is cranking madly away as they chatter, laugh, observe, and mimic. Their horse gallops to a sudden stop, hooves poised in mid-air, as Vertov freezes all the life and elegance into an interval that fills the screen with what one might call the *evidence of life*. He then contracts that image into the strip manipulated by the editor's skill. We have seen some minutes ago a young peasant woman in the market. We see her now as a series of single frames composing a strip to be organized into the film we are watching, the segment we've just seen. As if to intensify the subversion of illusion involved in the contraction and multiplication of the image, Vertov swivels the image about so that the strip lies on its side. We have been confronted with an

Eleatic paradox in which confusion as to the anteriority of the woman's existence to her presence as an image is compounded by confusion as to the anteriority of the film strip to the projected illusion.

Another, ultimate variation on this theme presents the strip of frames which record the faces of children, and it is only much later in the film that we see, we recognize, these children in movement—alive within the illusion of the film. They are the magician's enchanted and enchanting children, brought to life by a "conjurer," that conjurer who has in turn animated the magician. For behind every image of the cameraman is another cameraman, and behind the magician. . . . We have, then, a loop which runs as in a Möbius strip, twisting from "live" to "fictive" and back again.

Pushing beyond the disclosure of filmmaking techniques, Vertov has abandoned the didactic for the maieutic, rendering causality visible. Now, it is the most general characteristic of adult logic, as distinguished from that of children, to be reversible. The logico-mathematical operations characteristic of adults are, as we know, interiorized actions, reversible in that each operation involves a counteroperation—as in addition and subtraction.<sup>15</sup> We must, then, looking at *The Man with the Movie Camera*, see, in that eye reflected by the camera lens, Vertov as defining—through the systematic subversion of the certitudes of illusion—a threshold in the development of consciousness. "Rendering uncertainty more certain," he invited the camera to come of age, transforming with a grand cartesian gesture *The Man with the Movie Camera* from a Magician into an Epistemologist.

15. For a presentation of this notion, central to Jean Piaget's theory of developmental epistemology, see his *Six Études de Psychologie*, Geneva, 1904. For previous discussion within a specifically cinematic context, see Annette Michelson, "Bodies in Space: Film as Carnal Knowledge," *Artforum*, February 1969.