



**DZIGA VERTOV** (Denis Arkadievich Kaufman. 2 January 1896, Bialystok, Poland—12 February 1954, Moscow, cancer.)

**World Film Directors, vol. I, ed. John Wakeman. H.W. Wilson, NY 1987:**

Soviet documentarist and prophet of *cinéma-vérité*, was born in Bialystok, Poland, the son of a librarian. Vertov's younger brothers both became well-known cameramen, Mikhail Kaufman being Vertov's principal cameraman on virtually all of his films, while Boris, after working for Jean Vigo in France, went to Hollywood to film for such directors as Elia Kazan and Sidney Lumet.

In 1906, as a schoolboy in Bialystok, Vertov wrote his first poems, and in 1912-1915 he studied music at the Bialystok conservatory. The family fled eastward when Germany invaded Poland in 1915, settling in Moscow, where Denis and Mikhail remained when their parents returned to Poland. Between 1914 and 1916 Denis Kaufman wrote poems, verse satires, essays, and science-fiction novels, and it was apparently at this time that he took the pseudonym Dziga Vertov. The name signifies something like "spinning top" and has connotations of perpetual motion—appropriate enough for a vigorous, stocky young man who proclaimed himself a futurist—an adherent of a movement that sought to give artistic expression to the dynamic energy of machinery.

In 1916-1917 Vertov studied medicine in St. Petersburg (and/or, according to some accounts, at the Psycho-Neurological Institute in Moscow). He continued to write, his experimental verse reflecting an increasing interest (shared with other futurists) in the aesthetic and psychological effects of noise and sound. This led him to the experiments with recorded sound, conducted in St. Petersburg on an old phonograph, which he dignified as his "laboratory of hearing." He recorded and juxtaposed in various combinations the sounds of machines, wind, rushing water, human speech, and music. He also struggled to find a way to transcribe non-verbal sounds (for example of a sawmill and waterfall) using words and letters "in musical-thematic creations of word-montage." These experiments, as David Bordwell points out, reflect a "characteristic Vertov duality of scientific control and artistic impulse, two preoccupations which fused in a concern with the idea of montage." It should be said that the techniques of montage and collage—the fragmentation and recombinations of often diverse materials—were much in the air at that time, as is evident in contemporary avant-garde art of all kinds.

In the spring of 1918 Vertov met Mikhail Koltzov, who offered him a chance to work in the cinema, and thus to extend his montage experiments to visual material. Vertov accepted and became an editor (soon senior editor) of the Moscow Film Committee's first regular newsreel. *Kino-nedelya* (Cinema Week) used material filmed by Soviet cameramen who covered the war from agit-trains, along with all kinds of other documentary material. The intention was always as much propagandist as documentary, and the newsreels were intended to show that despite invasions and civil war, the new Soviet government was spreading its authority throughout the vast territories of the USSR. Vertov put together twenty-nine issues of *Kino-nedelya* between June 1918 and the end of the year, and ten more in the first

half of 1919. It was invaluable experience for a young filmmaker, and some issues of the newsreel show him beginning to develop touches of originality in his handling of the material, especially in his use of rapid cutting.

Vertov ceased to work on *Kino-nedelya* in July 1919, but used the newsreel material already accumulated to assemble a long historical (and propagandist) document, *Godoushchine revolyutsii* (*Anniversary of the Revolution*, 1919) By the end of 1919 Vertov, guided by the cameraman Pyotr Yermolov, was himself filming the battle between the Red Army and the Whites for possession of Tsaritsyn, soon afterwards working this footage into a short film. In January 1920 he accompanied the Soviet president Kalinin on a propaganda tour of the southwestern front, showing *Anniversary of the Revolution* and filming the journey for use in subsequent short documentaries. Further such expeditions (and short films) followed, and in 1921-1922 Vertov made another long (thirteen reel) compilation film, *Istoriya grazhdanskoj vojny* (*History of the Civil War*).

In 1922 Vertov became director of Kino-Pravda, a new series of newsreel magazines of which there were twenty-three issues between 1922 and 1925. The series was called *Kino-Pravda* because it was conceived as a kind of cinematic adjunct of the newspaper *Pravda*, but name literally means "cinema-truth," and it is now widely recognized that Vertov developed the concept and principles of *cinéma-vérité* some forty years before that movement came into its own. In fact, Vertov's importance as an innovatory filmmaker was matched almost from the beginning of his career by his influence as a theorist. His first essays and manifestos on cinema appeared as early as 1919, written in the stridently iconoclastic style favored by the futurists.

In 1922 Vertov established the Council of Three, whose other two members were his wife and assistant Yelizaveta Svilova and his brother Mikhail. The Council's manifesto was issued in December 1922 and published as "Kinoki-Perevorot" (Kinoks-Revolution) in the June 1923 issue of LEF (Left Arts Front), the futurist-constructivist magazine founded by the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky. The Kinoki (as they were thereafter called) demanded an end to film drama—to actors, sets, studios, scripts and other manifestations of the "bourgeois imagination." They insisted that the proper concern of the cinema was "the ordinary people, filmed in everyday life and at work." And they called for a revolutionary cinema—one that would look at the real world with the *kino-glaz* (cinema-eye) and see the beauty of the new

technology and the people who controlled it: "I am the cinema-eye, I am the mechanical eye, I am the machine revealing the world to you as only I can see it."

However, as David Bordwell points out, Vertov was always torn between the attractions of reality and imagination, science and art. We find him praising the camera's ability to record reality more fully and objectively than the human eye, and *also* the cinema's ability, through montage, to impose its own order on "the chaos of visual phenomena filling the universe": "The cinema eye is a means of making the invisible visible, the obscure clear, the hidden obvious, the disguised exposed, and acting not acting. But it is not enough to show bits of truth on the screen, separate frames of truth. These frames must be thematically organized so that the whole is also truth."

The same dichotomy is evident in Vertov's pioneering *Kino-Pravda* newsreels. The raw material for the newsreels was gathered by a team of cameramen stationed throughout the USSR and loosely supervised by Vertov. The film was processed and edited by Vertov and Svilova in a Moscow basement: "It was dark and damp, with an earthen floor and holes that you stumbled into at every turn. Large hungry rats scuttled over our feet. . . . You had to take care that your film never touched anything but the table, or it would get wet. This dampness prevented our reels of lovingly-edited film from sticking together properly, rusted our scissors and our splicers. Don't lean back on that chair—film is hanging there, as it was all over the room. Before dawn—damp—cold—teeth chattering, I wrap Comrade Svilova in a *third* jacket."

Vertov said that each issue of *Kino-Pravda* was different from its predecessor: "Slowly but surely the alphabet the film-language was built up in this unusual laboratory. . . . Every day we had to invent something new." In pursuit of unique images of reality, the Kinoki fixed their cameras to motorcycles or the fenders of trains, climbed houses and swung from cranes. And in pursuit of "cinema-truth" (which, as Jean Rouch points out, can mean not "the truth" but "the truth of cinema") Vertov delightedly explored all of the cinema's devices for the manipulation of space and time: "Cinema-eye avails itself of all the current means of recording: ultra-high speed, microcinematography, reverse motion, multiple exposure, foreshortening, etc., and does not consider these as tricks, but as normal techniques of which wide use must be made. Cinema-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."

The part of Vertov's nature that made him the prophet of *cinéma-vérité* is nowhere more evident than in a film he made in 1924, and called *Kinoglaz*. Using "candid camera" techniques, Vertov and his brother Mikhail took concealed cameras to Moscow markets and beer-parlors, rode with ambulances to accidents, and spied on criminals from behind windows. But at the same time he was pursuing so rigorously the *cinéma-vérité* ideal of "life caught unawares," he was experimenting with the creative artificialities of animated film (including *Segodnia—Today*, 1924, the first animated film made in the Soviet Union).

Vertov's experiments did not please everyone, and his rambunctious manifestos and articles made him many enemies. The critic I. Sokolov complained that "montage deforms facts. The rearrangement of fragments changes their sense." And the distinguished screen writer and novelist Viktor Shklovsky argues that newsreels should provide exact information, not montage and visual trickery: "A newsreel needs titles and dates. . . . Mussolini talking interests me. But a straightforward plump and bald-headed man who talks can go and talk behind the screen. The whole sense of a newsreel is in the date, time and place. A newsreel without this is like a card catalogue in the gutter." But Vertov and the Kinoki had their ardent supporters too—some critics, Mayakovsky and LEF, *Pravda* and other newspapers, and the movie audiences themselves, who would complain

to the film trusts if *Kino-Pravda* did not arrive on schedule.

In 1924 Vertov joined a new studio, Kultkine, which took over the production of *Kino-Pravda* and another film magazine produced by the Kinki in 1923-1925 (*Kin-Kalendar*, later called *Goskino-Kalendar*). It was at Kultkine that Vertov made the first of several ambitious feature-length documentaries, *Shagai, Soviet* (*Stride, Soviet*, 1926). Its famous "heart of the machines" sequence, celebrating the power and beauty of the new technology, marked a new level of virtuosity in Vertov's mastery of montage, and there was much praise also for the way in which the film's commentary, on titles, is integrated with images. Indeed, Vertov's artistic instincts were plainly overcoming his concern for "life caught unawares." His next film *Shestaya chast mira* (*A Sixth of the World*, 1926) was subtitled "a lyrical film poem," and used montage techniques to impose an impression of unity on material shot all over the Soviet Union. Similarly, in *Odinnadsatyi* (*The Eleventh Year*, 1926), superimposition, repetition of images, and rhythmic cutting turn the story of the building of the Dnieper Dam into a metaphor of Soviet solidarity.

Vertov's last silent film was technically the most dazzling of all, *Chelovek s kinoapparatom* (*The Man With a Movie Camera*, 1929). Working as usual with his brother Mikhail as his cameraman and Svilova as editor, Vertov turned this Moscow travelogue into a demonstration of all the resources of the movie camera and the cutting room, employing among other devices variable speeds, dissolves, split-screen effects, prismatic lenses, and multiple superimposition. It is perhaps the first film that clearly establishes the camera as a participant in what it records. We see people in a movie theatre watching the film that *we* are watching, and then we see a cameraman shooting that film. A man points a camera at us and in its lens we see reflected the camera that is filming that camera. In Russia the film was condemned for its preoccupation with form, and even Eisenstein attacked its "purposeless camera hooliganism," but foreign critics were stunned by its brilliance. A more recent critic, David Bordwell, calls it "a continuous autocritique of filmmaking" which "explores film as art, artifice, and artifact."

Vertov, who had begun with experiments in sound montage, believed that the "cinema-eye" should be allied to the "radio-ear," and showed what he meant by this in his first sound film, *Entuziasm* (*Enthusiasm*, 1931), a documentary about the achievements of the miners of the Don coal basin, it astonished audiences with the novelty and vividness of its soundtrack and the inventiveness with which Vertov used it—orchestrating sound in synchronization, in parallelism, in counterpoint, with all the flexibility that distinguished his manipulation of visual images. Again, however, there was much criticism from Russian reviewers, and it may be that, as Jay Leyda says, "Vertov's intoxication with his new instrument often got the better of him and obstructed a normal perception of his new film by even the most sympathetic audiences."

In 1931, nevertheless, Vertov was allowed to tour Europe with *Entuziasm* and *Chelovek s kinoapparatom*. His behavior in London left Thorold Dickinson with the impression that "Vertov was probably the most obstinate film personality of all time." Dickinson says that when the director attended a showing at the Film Society of London, "he insisted on controlling the sound projection. During the rehearsal he kept it at a normal level, but at the performance, flanked on either side by the sound manager of the Tivoli Theatre and an officer of the Society, he raised the volume at the climaxes to an earsplitting level. Begged to desist, he refused, and finished the performance fighting for the instrument of control, while the building seemed to tremble with the flood of noise coming from behind the screen." His personal eccentricities notwithstanding, Vertov's ideas by this time had reached and influenced many foreign directors of the greatest significance, among them Ruttman, Vigo, Carné, Ivens, and Grierson, and his work was received with fervent admiration all over

Europe. After seeing *Entuziasm*, Chaplin wrote to Vertov: "I would never have imagined that industrial noises could be ordered in such a way and become so beautiful. I consider *Entuziasm* to be a staggering symphony." Returning to Russia, and increasingly embattled, Vertov assembled all such compliments in an article defending himself against his Soviet critics.

It was three years before Vertov showed his second sound film, *Tri pesni o Lenine* (*Three Songs of Lenin*, 1934), which is generally regarded as his masterpiece. Made to commemorate the tenth anniversary of Lenin's death, this is a free collage of documentary and archive material built around ballads sung in Lenin's praise by peasant women from the Central Asian republic of Uzbekistan. The strange, exotic blending of old and new in the film is particularly compelling in the first song. "My face was in a dark prison," about women being freed from the veil. For Vertov's original idea for a straightforward documentary had developed into a lyrical meditation on Lenin's work and influence, and there were few whose lives had been more completely transformed than the women of Soviet Central Asia. David Bordwell has noted how "images recur like leitmotifs from song to song," and "sound and image sometimes converge, sometimes separate" in a way that successfully reconciles documentary reportage with formal control. Jay Leyda refers to a passage in the second song "where newsreel material of Lenin's funeral is juxtaposed to a series of faces, of many times and places, flooded with sorrow, creating a passage of genuine tragic beauty...[Vertov] knew how far the pure document can be useful, because he had advanced beyond it."

Like its predecessors, however, *Three Songs of Lenin* was less successful at home (where it was soon withdrawn from circulation) than abroad. Noting that it received a prize at the 1935 Venice Film Festival, Richard Taylor wrote: "It is rather surprising that a Soviet film praising Lenin and his achievements should have received such an accolade in Fascist Italy and this is perhaps a tribute to the power of the film. At home, despite the obvious adulation of Lenin in the film, Vertov's work never quite escaped the suspicion that surrounds all innovatory and experimental works of art, and the accusation that haunted Eisenstein in the 1920s—that his films were incomprehensible to the masses."

The attacks on Vertov's formalism mounted, and *Kolibelnya* (*Lullaby*, 1937), a film about the women of the Soviet Union and Spain, seems to have been his last fully independent work. He codirected with Svilova and J. Bliokh a montage film, *Serge Ordjonikidze* in 1937, and seems to have directed *Tri geroini* (*Three Heroines*, 1938), a seven-reel tribute to the women of the Soviet armed forces. Thereafter there were a few short documentaries and a number of unrealized projects. Between 1947 and his death from cancer in 1954, he made many unexceptional newsreels. Vertov's career ended in frustration, and throughout the 1940s and 1950s his work and ideas seemed almost forgotten. Both were rediscovered by a new generation of filmmakers in the 1960s, when the development of the lightweight camera made his ideal of "life caught unawares" into an achievable reality. As Georges Sadoul has said, his "significance in the history of the cinema has only increased with the years."

#### **from *The Illustrated History of Soviet Cinema*. Neva Zorkaya.**

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#### **"Kino-Pravda" (FILM TRUTH) OF DZIGA VERTOV**

. . . I am the eye of the cinema. I am a mechanical eye. I am a machine, and show the world as only I see it.  
. . . I am the continual motion. I come up close to objects, and I move away. I crawl under them, and I leap atop of them. I trot beside the muzzle of a running horse, and I cut full speed into a crowd. I run ahead of attacking soldiers. I fall over onto my back, and I rise up into the air with the airplanes. Up and down I go, up and down. My road leads to a fresh perception of the world. I code an unknown world and do it in a way that is absolutely new.

These resounding and challenging words come from the "Kinoki" manifesto. They are more than mere poetic metaphors. The group of young documentary filmmakers led by Dziga Vertov was unique in the fanatic faith they displayed toward their principles. They were a ubiquitous, incredibly audacious group of people. The famous film *The Man With a Movie Camera* shows objects from absolutely unexpected angles: a train, for example, rushes up over your head from below. These people dubbed themselves "Kinoki," from the Russian abbreviation for cinema (kino) and eye (oko). A bold and reckless lot, a Kinok could parachute down, pressing his camera tight against his chest, to film a plane in flight. He could scale the dome of a church or lie low on railroad ties under the wheels of a train speeding overhead. Dziga Vertov and his team of cameramen were everywhere, day and night, urban commotion, and the placid tranquility of country life—all nooks and crannies, all spheres of social life caught their eyes.

Dziga Vertov was the pseudonym of Denis Kaufman (1896-1954). The name Vertov, coined from the Russian word "verchenye," or rotation, greatly reflected the spirit of the times. The three sons of a lawyer from the small town of Belostok—Denis, Mikhail, and Boris—were all destined to work in film although they pursued different cinematic paths. Denis became the creator of the documentary genre, of "Kino-Pravda," or Film Truth, and became famous as Dziga Vertov. Mikhail, his brother's faithful helper, an active Kinok, and cameraman of infinite temerity, lived a long life as a veteran of the Central Studio of Documentary Films in Moscow. And Boris, a proficient cameraman, had the fortune of filming such Jean Vigo masterpieces as *L'Atalante* and *Zéro de Conduite* (*Nought for Conduct*). Then he worked in Hollywood with Orson Welles and other celebrities.

It is impossible not to take special note of the montage artist Elizaveta Svilova, Vertov's wife and loyal friend. She, too, was one of the Kinoki group; and, outliving her husband, she preserved his archives and creative legacy. She also made a notable contribution in having the Vertov materials published in the 1960s, thus bringing back from oblivion the name and glory of the "Cinema Eye" creator. The history of Soviet cinema knows several such illustrious women—wives to whom their husbands owe posthumous glory. Among them are Kuleshov's widow, Alexandra Khokhlova; Sergei Eisenstein's widow, Pera Atasheva; and Julia Solntseva, married to Alexander Dovzhenko. They weren't seeking pecuniary compensation; they just wanted respect and justice for their late spouses' memories.

Dziga Vertov began working in film in 1918. He drew inspiration from Lenin's idea that the film industry should be started with documentaries and newsreels. Dziga's first productions—*The Anniversary of the Revolution* (1918), the first issues of the film journals *Cinema Weekly* and *Film Truth*, and the full-length *History of the Civil War* (1922)—were professionally quite sophisticated.

Even at that early stage of his work, Dziga was nurturing bold ideas of a "world without acting," of a cinema free of fantasy, literature, plots, props, and actors—of everything that goes into the notion of fiction; *only* documents, *only* facts, *only* things as they are, *only* chronicles were important. Vertov outlined this program in his manifesto of 1922, which he called *We*.

We consider the psychological Russo-German cinematic drama, encumbered with visions and childhood reminiscences ridiculous.

To the American adventure films, with the showy dynamism and productions of Pinkerton escapades—thanks from the Kinoki for a rapid succession of pictures and close-ups. . . . It is a notch above the psychological drama, but ill-premised all the same. Stereotype. A copy of a copy.

We declare the old motion pictures—romances, theatricals, etc.—leprous.

. . . Not only were old plots unsatisfactory, but the very notion of the plot itself; not only were actors with teary eyes like Mozzhukhin detestable, but the class of actors as a whole.

It would be superfluous to point out the obvious erroneousness of some of Vertov's prophecies and judgments; the development of cinema in the Soviet Union and other countries has done well enough despite sermons and anathemas by him and his Kinoki.

Techniques of montage sequences have been incorporated into the curriculum of schools of cinematography all around the world.

And other Vertovian concepts, such as "life on the spur of the moment," "the cinematic eye," "man with a movie camera," and "a world without acting" have entered cinematography's basic vocabulary as well. Vertov had the temperament of a polemicist, but his mind worked like that of a scientist; this was reflected in the universality of his manifestoes. He was an innovator with a capital *I*. His films laid the foundation not only for the genre of Soviet documentaries but for all cinematography as well. Of course he did have a unique source of material which proved quite fruitful: an old Mother Russia boiling with turmoil, rising from slumber, the "Sixth of the World" that became the first socialist state in the history of mankind. But though there were others who made films about new Soviet life—the subject material was very popular—it is the Vertov's films that have gone down in world cinema history.

*The Film Eye, Get a Move On, Soviet, A Sixth of the World, Number Eleven, The Man with a Movie Camera, Enthusiasm or Symphony of the Donpass* [A coal region.], *Three Songs About Lenin, and Lullaby*—all these documentaries haven't lost any of their verve, even today, despite their old-fashioned naivete, so characteristic of those times. Their fresh vigor and authenticity capture the soul.

Vertov was passionately in love with the revolution. Soviets, working men, Young Pioneers, street processions, co-ops, communes, municipal canteens, anti-religious propaganda, flags, banners—all were dear to his heart and inspiring to his soul. He believed in a world revolution and in the imminent collapse of capitalism. He had an abiding faith in the International.

As befits the image of a "cinema eye scout," Dziga Vertov, camera in hand, makes his way through to the events of the day that were blasting over the waves of Communist International (first Soviet radio station), making the headlines of *Pravda* and *Izvestia*.

Vertov produced the first-ever sound interview. He interviewed a young female worker at the Dnieper hydropower project. The girl's several-minute monologue, syncopated to the montage and narration rhythm and addressed directly to the viewer, had a literally dumbfounding effect. Today, the simultaneous close-up interview is one of the most widely-used techniques in film and television.

Dziga Vertov, a generator of imaginative, artistic ideas fifty years ahead of their time, can easily be called the Edison of the documentary film genre.

**Grierson on Documentary. Edited by Forsyth Hardy. UCAI Berkeley&LA, 1966**

The Vertov method of film-making is based on a supremely sound idea, and one which must be a preliminary to any movie method at all. He has observed that there are things of the every-day which achieve a new value, leap to a more vigorous life, the moment they get into a movie camera or an intimately cut sequence. It is at that point we all begin; and, backing our eye with the world, we try to pick the leapers. The secret may be in an angle, or an arrangement of light, or an arrangement of movement, but there is hardly one of us but gets more out of the camera than we ever thought of putting into it. In that sense there is a Kino Eye. In that sense, too, the Kino Eye is more likely to discover things in the wide-world-of-all-possible-arrangements which exists outside the studios.

Vertov, however, has pushed the argument to a point at which it becomes ridiculous. The camera observes in its own bright way and

he is prepared to give it his head. The man is with the camera, not the camera with the man. Organization of things observed, brain control, imagination or fancy control of things observed: these other rather necessary activities in the making of art are forgotten. *The Man With the Movie Camera* is in consequence not a film at all: it is a snapshot album. There is no story, no dramatic structure, and no special revelation of the Moscow it has chosen for a subject. It just dithers about on the surface of life picking up shots here, there and everywhere, slinging them together as the Dadaists used to sling together their verses, with an emphasis on the particular which is out of all relation to a rational existence. Many of the shots are fine and vital; some of the camera tricks, if not new, are at least interesting; but exhibitionism or, if you prefer it, virtuosity in a craftsman does not qualify him as a creator.

*The Man With the Movie Camera* will, however, bring a great deal of instruction to film students. The camera is a bright little blackbird, and there are rabbits to be taken out of the hat (or bin) of montage which are infinitely magical, but. . . articulacy is a virtue which will continue to have its say-so. Here by the *reductio ad absurdum* is proof for the schoolboys.

I have just been watching an Atlantic liner putting to sea, from—I am happy to say—the liner's point of view. Shots have been cropping up for an hour that I would describe as sheer cinema. The patterns of men rolling up the cargo net, the curve of the rope shot in parabola to the tug, the sudden gliding movement-astern of the tug, the white plume on the *Mauretania* high up in the dry dock, the massed energy of the black smoke pouring in rolls from the funnel and set against the rhythmic curve of the ship against the sky—they have all, possibly, a visual virtue in themselves. But the dramatic truth, and therefore, finally, the cinematic truth too, is that the ship is putting to sea. She is in process and continuity of something or other. Say only that she is setting out to cross an ocean and has the guts for it; or say, by the Eastern European emigrants in the steerage, that a bunch of people are going with hope to a new world; say what you like, according to your sense of ultimate importances, the necessity is that you say something. The Kino Eye in that sense is only the waiter who serves the hash. No especial virtue in the waiting compensates for a lunatic cook.

**Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film. 2<sup>nd</sup> revised edition. Erik Barnouw. Oxford U Press NY 1993**

Vertov saw the traditional fiction film, descendant of theater artifice, as something in the same class as religion—"opium for the people." The task of Soviet films, as Vertov saw it, was to document socialist reality.

To build cinema on theatrical tradition seemed to him outrageous foolishness. Theater offered a "scabby substitute" for life; the same was true of theatrical film with its synthetic struggles and heroics—a dangerous weapon controlled by capitalists and NEPmen. He scorned producers and distributors who "snapped up the scraps from the German table. . . the American table." "Come to life," he urged film makers. He asked them to stop running from "the prose of life." They must become "craftsmen of seeing—organizers of visible life," armed with a "maturing eye."

His attacks—on almost everything being done—inevitably won for Vertov many enemies in the film world. But his views also had support—some of it in high places. Early in 1922 Lenin held a discussion about film with the Commissar of Education, Anatoli Lunacharsky. "Of all the arts," Lenin told him, "for us film is the most important," and he spoke especially of films "reflecting Soviet actuality." Such films, thought Lenin, "must begin with newsreel." Later he called for what came to be known as the "Leninist film-proportion," a doctrine that every film program must have a balance between fiction and actuality material.

"The history of Cinema-Eye," said Vertov in a 1929 lecture during a visit to Paris, "has been a relentless struggle to modify the

course of world cinema, to achieve in cinema a new emphasis on the unplayed film over the played film, to substitute the document for the *mis-en-scène*, to break out of the proscenium of the theater and to enter the arena of life itself.”

While Vertov’s *One Sixth of the World* was winning acclaim, his position in the Soviet film world was slipping. His views, so fanatically argued, made him troublesome. Besides, they represented an ultimate challenge to authority. Stalin was as interested as Lenin in cinema, but was more intent on control. During the first Five Year Plan, begun in 1928, determined efforts were made to coordinate film content with political goals. Project approvals and budgets were based on detailed scenarios. Vertov’s documentary ideas collided with this procedure: how could a documentarist predict—or guarantee—what truths he would find and record in the arena of life? He at first said he could not write scenarios. That attitude marked him as a man with dangerous “anti-planning” views. To continue his work, he eventually compromised, submitting documents which he preferred to call *analyses*—analyzing his intentions without specifying shots and sequences.

Thus he eventually won the chance to make a film he had long considered—on the documentary cameraman and his role in society. In this he set out to dramatize all the theories he had poured into his manifestos and polemics. It would be his testament.

It was a reckless notion. At a time when technical experimentation was increasingly damned as “formalism,” and the Stalinist view of “Soviet realism” increasingly favored explicit social doctrine, the new Vertov film with its intellectual pyrotechnics must have seemed a defiant gesture. Yet it became the film by which he was to be known throughout much of the world and even in the Soviet Union—in spite of mixed initial reactions.

*The Man With the Movie Camera* (*Chelovek s Kinoapparatom*, 1929) presents, on one level, a kaleidoscope of daily life in the Soviet Union: sleeping, waking, going to work, playing. At the same time it presents constant glimpses of a film cameraman—Mikhail Kaufman—in action, recording Soviet life for all to see. ...We see the making of a film and at the same time the film that is being made. The interweaving of the two is constant and, in its playfulness, disarming, stimulating, often baffling. We get a through-the-camera view of a passerby; see him reacting to the camera; then see the camera as seen by him, with its own reflection in the lens. The film incessantly reminds us that it is a film. The shadow of the camera is allowed to invade the shot.

Since much of the film shows Mikhail Kaufman in action, as photographed by assistants, *The Man With the Movie Camera* involves staging and contrivance to an extent previously rejected by Vertov. But the artificiality is deliberate: an avant-garde determination to suppress illusion in favor of a heightened awareness. The film is an essay on film truth, crammed with tantalizing ironies. But what did it finally mean for audiences? Had Vertov demonstrated the importance of the reporter as documentarist? Or had his barrage of film tricks suggested—intentionally? unintentionally?—that no documentary could be trusted? Of the brilliance of *The Man With the Movie Camera* there was never a doubt. It was dazzling in its ambiguity. Eisenstein, usually a Vertov supporter, felt he was slipping into “unmotivated camera mischief” and even “formalism.”

During the years following *The Man With the Movie Camera*, Vertov visited various western European countries and found audiences of *cinéastes* wildly enthusiastic. But his position continued to slip at home. The coming of sound found Vertov and Kaufman working in the studios of the Ukraine—a reflection of disfavor in Moscow.

The work of Dziga Vertov and of those he influenced had unquestionable propaganda values for the Soviet government in the early and mid 1920's. Yet Vertov thought of himself not as a propagandist, but as a reporter: his mission was to get out the news. Conflict—or potential conflict—between the obligations of a journalist

and the demands of doctrine was not yet sensed as a problem in the early Vertov days. This happy moment passed quickly.

During the Stalin period increasing international tension, increasing fear of encirclement, increasing armament production and secrecy, along with pressures on film makers to support policies and tactics, all this laid a heavy hand on fiction and documentary alike. A golden film moment—brief, like many a renaissance in the arts—was over, and the spotlight shifted elsewhere.

**FILM: An International History of the Medium. Robert Sklar. Prentice-Hall & Harry Abrams. Englewood-Cliffs NJ, 1993**

In the film’s [*The Man With the Movie Camera*] opening credits Vertov proclaimed it an experiment without intertitles, script, actors, or sets: a work aimed “to create a truly international film-language, *absolute writing in film*, and the complete separation of cinema from theater and literature.”

*The Man with the Movie Camera* is one of the most unusual works in cinema history. It is also perhaps the most difficult of all major films, almost certainly requiring more than a single viewing to grasp some of its meanings and pleasures. A coherent summary of all it attempts to accomplish is probably next to impossible. But many with an open mind toward the varieties of filmmaking and an interest in the autonomy of the cinema image will find it one of their most memorable film experiences.

Presented on one level as a day in the life of a film team photographing places and people in Soviet cities, *The Man with the Movie Camera* is basically a film about the recording and viewing of images. Its opening sequence establishes the beginning and the end of the image-making process. A trick shot shows a camera, and on top of that a tiny cameraman with his own camera on a tripod. Then there are shots of a movie theater—first empty, then filling with spectators—and a projection booth. All these scenes emphasize the continuity of the act of looking, with metaphors such as one that links window blinds, a camera lens, and a human eye.

The cameraman’s work is linked to circularity. Shots of the hand-cranked camera are intercut with moving wheels of cars and bicycles. (Denis Kaufman’s pseudonym, Vertov, was derived from the verb to spin or rotate; the first name Dziga, mimicked the sound of a camera crank turning.) A regularly repeated segment of the film shows the man with the movie camera mounted in the back of an open car photographing people in a moving car beside him (perhaps they should have called the film “Two Men with Movie Cameras,” to account for the cameraman in an unseen third moving car who is filming the filming).

Soon the work of Elizaveta Svilova as editor is brought into the picture. Here the materiality of the image is stressed—its existence on rolls of celluloid that are stored in long rows, studied, cut, hung from clips. The editor’s work is visually compared to manicuring, sewing, and spinning. All these subjects are presented in a dizzying array of visual techniques—an incomplete list includes **split-screen** (separate images occupying different parts of the frame) shots, speeded-up action, **freeze frames** (a moving image stopped on the screen as if a still), images at a slant, stop-motion trick photography (as when the camera and tripod become animated and move by themselves), and floods of images flowing at the spectator, at times with no apparent continuity.

The third term of the image process after photographing and editing is viewing, and the audience experience in continually reintroduced—the spectators in the theater, the screen, and sometimes on the screen a shot of the audience itself. And finally there is the actual world represented amid the world of image-making and image-consuming. It shows Soviet people at work and play, marrying and divorcing, dying and being born (the film contains one of the earliest shots of a birth in cinema history). Without explanatory intertitles, the spectator unable to pick up clues from Russian-language documents or

signs in the frame is often a bit lost as to what is happening. Still, for all its avant-garde technique and theoretical ambitions, *The Man with the Movie Camera* is one of the few silent films that strongly conveys a sense of everyday life in Soviet Russia.

**Jonathan Dawson, "Dziga Vertov" (Senses of Cinema):**

"Six years after his death, the French documentary filmmakers Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin adopted Vertov's theory and practice into their *methode* of cinéma vérité. In recent years Vertov's heritage of poetic documentary has influenced many filmmakers all over the world. In 1962, the first Soviet monograph on Vertov was published, followed by another collection, 'Dziga Vertov: Articles, Diaries, Projects.' To recall the 30th anniversary of Vertov's death, three New York cultural organizations put on the first American retrospective of Vertov's work, with seminars and curated screenings of films by Vertov's contemporaries and his followers from all over the world. Just as some

feature films—*Bullitt* (Peter Yates, 1968), or *Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958), say, with San Francisco, or almost any film set in Paris—capture a particular and enduring sense of a city, so many early documentary filmmakers felt that the modern city itself was the only proper subject of their cameras. Through this avant-garde genre of the 'city-film', which included films as diverse as Alberto Cavalcanti's *Rien que les Heures* (1926), Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin* (1927) and several of the later Crown Film Unit productions, it is now possible to see Dziga Vertov's work as the most innovative and excitingly free with the new medium of them all. Certainly *Man with a Movie Camera*, made up as it is of 'bits and pieces' of cities from Moscow to the Ukraine, remains a perfect distillation of the sense of a modern city life that looks fresh and true still. In the end this one film is the strongest reminder that, in spite of the extraordinary pressures on his personal and working life, Vertov was one of the greatest of all the pioneer filmmakers."

**COMING UP IN THE BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS:**

- Sept 13 Mervyn LeRoy **I AM A FUGITIVE FROM A CHAIN GANG** 1932 (35mm)  
Sept 20 Howard Hawks **BRINGING UP BABY** 1938 (DVD)  
Sept 27 Victor Fleming **GONE WITH THE WIND** (DVD)  
Oct 4 Akira Kurosawa **STRAY DOG/NORA INU** 1949 (35mm)  
Oct 11 Vittorio de Sica **UMBERTO D** 1952 (35mm)  
Oct 18 Robert Bresson **A MAN ESCAPED/UN CONDAMNÉ À MORT S'EST ÉCHAPPÉ OU LE VENT SOUFFLE OÙ IL VEUT** 1956 (35mm)  
Oct 25 Luis Buñuel **DIARY OF A CHAMBERMAID/LE JOURNAL D'UNE FEMME DE CHAMBRE** 1964 (35mm)  
Nov 1 Andrei Tarkovsky **ANDREI RUBLEV/ANDREY RUBLYOV** 1966 (DVD)  
Nov 8 Peter Yates **BULLITT** 1968 (35mm)  
Nov 15 Woody Allen **ANNIE HALL** 1977 (35mm)  
Nov 22 Rainer Werner Fassbinder **MARRIAGE OF MARIA BRAUN/DIE EHE DER MARIA BRAUN** 1979 (35mm)  
Nov 29 Terry Gilliam **BRAZIL** 1985 (35mm)  
Nov Dec 6 Luchino Visconti **THE LEOPARD/IL GATTOPADRO** 1963 (35mm)

**SPECIAL GUSTO FILM PRESENTATION AT THE ALBRIGHT-KNOX ART GALLERY SEPTEMBER 23**

Two silent film classics, introduced by Bruce Jackson & Diane Christian and accompanied by Philip Carli  
Buster Keaton's **THE GENERAL** (5 p.m.) And F.W. Murnau **SUNRISE** (8 p.m.)

**TURNER CLASSIC MOVIES IS SHOWING SEVEN MICHAEL POWELL FILMS ON SEPTEMBER SUNDAYS:**

**49th Parallel, Black Narcissus, The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp, A Matter of Life and Death, Peeping Tom and The Red Shoes.**  
They'll also be airing **Thief of Baghdad** in November and **Night Ambush** in December. Check the TCM website for screening times.

THE BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS ARE PRESENTED BY THE MARKET ARCADE FILM & ARTS CENTER &



**University at Buffalo** *The State University of New York*

...email Diane Christian: [engdc@buffalo.edu](mailto:engdc@buffalo.edu)

...email Bruce Jackson [bjackson@buffalo.edu](mailto:bjackson@buffalo.edu)

...for the series schedule, annotations, links and updates: <http://buffalofilmseminars.com>

...for the weekly email informational notes, send an email to either of us.