

## FALSE CINEMA: DZIGA VERTOV AND EARLY SOVIET FILM

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As the Soviets struggle with yet another rewriting of their history, questions must soon be raised about the role of those who undertook to sell the old, now discredited, history through various forms of artistic propaganda. In this respect, it will be interesting to see what happens to the reputation of the early Soviet filmmakers who are acclaimed in Western film histories as having revolutionized the art of film much as Lenin revolutionized the art of politics. Since these Soviet filmmakers were active propagandists for the Stalinist system, reappraisal of their artistic claims has long been necessary.

Of particular interest to students of propaganda and disinformation is the attention Western film texts give to a man known as Dziga Vertov, a contemporary of Sergei Eisenstein, who concentrated on the manipulation of actuality, or documentary, images. Few people outside academic film circles will have heard of Vertov. His films were never successful in popular terms, nor did he enjoy the reputation in his lifetime that has subsequently been bestowed on him in textbooks and other film literature.

The general pattern of these writings is to present Vertov as an avant-garde genius who was put down by Stalinist orthodoxy, a filmmaker who shared the same vision as Lenin when Communism, so the Khrushchev/Gorbachev thesis runs, not only had a human face but a face brightly lit with revolutionary art. This thesis itself is due for reappraisal; meanwhile there is clear evidence that the present-day interest shown by some in the West in the half-forgotten figure of a Dziga Vertov stems more from politics than aesthetics, forming part of a program advanced by activists in what they call radical film making. In keeping with this program, many of these activists have inserted themselves into film study centers, where they promote their political objectives using Vertov's name as an alibi. They have been aided in this enterprise through associating Vertov with the film term *cinéma-vérité*, a term which still enjoys a certain *réclame* in some film circles. Thus the concept of *cinéma-vérité* and Vertov's role as a Soviet propagandist both merit closer examination.

### *The life*

Virtually all our information about Vertov comes from Soviet sources and is of relatively recent origin. A handful of Westerners sympathetic to the Soviets knew him personally when they visited Moscow in the early 1930s to study cinematic techniques, but they have added little to our knowledge of him. The role of these few Western individuals in helping promote Vertov's name must also form part of our enquiry, but the main biographical facts concerning his life seem agreed on.<sup>1</sup>

Dziga Vertov was born Denis Kaufman, the eldest of three sons of Jewish intellectuals from Bialystok, in the Polish territories of the Czarist empire. In 1914 Vertov's parents moved to

Moscow, interrupting Vertov's studies in music in which he might otherwise have made a career. In Moscow, during the fateful years 1914-17, he adopted the name Dziga Vertov, perhaps, as some say, in a youthful gesture of avant-garde adventurism (he was born in 1896), but more plausibly in order to shed his Jewish identity.<sup>ii</sup> Vertov briefly contemplated a medical career at a Leningrad institute chosen by many Russian Jews because it placed no limit on the number of Jewish applicants. Here he met a fellow Jewish intellectual who also changed his name and soon became well known as Mikhail Koltsov, a Communist Party member and a high ranking Soviet journalist. In 1918 Koltsov brought Vertov into the Bolshevik regime's fledgling apparatus for controlling film. It seems that an encounter with a newsreel cameraman in 1917, during Russia's brief experience of liberal government, had led to Vertov's being captivated by the ways visual images can be manipulated through camera and editing procedures.

Vertov's apprenticeship in the film business lay in helping to organize into suitable propaganda form film material taken of Red Army activity. He also participated in the mobile propaganda studios which moved by train and steamer through Bolshevik controlled territory.

In 1919 Vertov's parents emigrated to Paris with his youngest brother, Boris. Born in 1906, Boris Kaufman became a cameraman in France, where he worked for Jean Vigo, eventually making his way to North America. He was the chief cinematographer for Elia Kazan's famous picture, *On The Waterfront*.

Vertov's other brother, Mikhail, one year his junior, took up still photography in the Red Army and became a movie cameraman when the Civil War was over. Vertov, Mikhail Kaufman, and a film editor, Elizaveta Svilova (whom Vertov married in 1923) engaged in polemics about the nature of cinematic reality, calling themselves a "Council of Three". The trio worked together on several films.

With the end of the Civil War and the switch in Bolshevik tactics to the New Economic Policy, Vertov turned to the production of periodic releases of "newsreels" which he called *Kinopravda*, the cinematic equivalent of the Party paper. Between 1922 and 1925 it seems that some twenty-three of these propaganda pieces were produced, most of them running for ten to fifteen minutes, although it is not clear how they were distributed and shown publicly, if indeed they ever were on a consistent basis. From a fragment preserved at the Museum of Modern Art in New York it would appear that they were sometimes shown in the street in an ad hoc manner by Vertov and his unit themselves, the screen being suspended from overhead trolley lines. Some may have played occasionally in workers' clubs and neighborhood reading rooms. It's possible that Vertov may also have had some role in the production of another newsreel at the same time that he was working on his *Kinopravda* ideas.<sup>iii</sup>

From short pieces organized around the concept of a newsreel, Vertov advanced to longer films in the same propaganda style, undertaken at the behest of state agencies. At the same time he threw himself into a furious battle against the new generation of Soviet film directors over the merits of his brand of "nonfiction" propaganda versus their form of fictional realism. Vertov never overcame his first experience of Russian peasants as audiences. The peasants, Vertov noticed from his place on government propaganda trains, mistrusted all graphic representations of reality, especially posters on the side of Agitprop rail cars. It was only when they saw on the

screen a "real" tractor or horse that they showed interest, Vertov believed. He argued, therefore, that the most effective images for purposes of indoctrination were those drawn from actual life. But it was also obvious that Russian audiences, like audiences everywhere, loved fictional entertainment. In Soviet cinemas the demand for American and European films was overwhelming. So much so, according to Vertov, that if ordinary people caught sight of a newsreel camera, they would immediately behave as if they were in a Western movie.<sup>iv</sup>

In 1927, the state film studio in Moscow where Vertov was employed fired him, having grown tired of his posturing and the friction he generated in the industry. Vertov was obliged to seek work in the state studio of the Ukraine, where he produced two of the longer films that have now gained something of a following in the West: *The Man With The Movie Camera* (1929) and *Enthusiasm, Symphony Of The Don Basin* (1931), one of the first Soviet films to use sound.

Vertov's name was virtually unknown outside the Soviet Union before 1929. But in that year and again in 1931 he visited a number of European cities, screening some of his films to small gatherings of avant-garde artists and film enthusiasts, many of them Communists or Soviet sympathizers. His trips outside the Soviet Union were part of a new propaganda offensive in which other Soviet filmmakers like Eisenstein and Pudovkin were also involved.

Returning to Moscow in 1932, Vertov was taken on by the studio that specialized in Soviet external propaganda, Mezhrabpom Film, one of the ventures of the German Communist entrepreneur, Willi Münzenberg.<sup>v</sup> Here Vertov produced his last major film, *Three Songs Of Lenin* (1934), to mark the tenth anniversary of Lenin's death. For this piece of work Vertov was awarded the Red Star, but he was unable to win his way back into official favor, perhaps because of his ideas about film-making, which the Party found unconvincing, perhaps because, despite his name change, he was marked as a Jewish intellectual at a time when Stalin was liquidating people with such connections; or perhaps because Vertov's panegyrics to Lenin were not, after all, so welcome to Stalin. *Three Songs Of Lenin* was later re-edited to include pictures of Stalin at key points in the film and with a new ending entirely given over to Stalin.<sup>vi</sup> Vertov, however returned to ordinary newsreel work, fortunate to escape Stalin's purges. He died in obscurity of cancer in 1954, his films forgotten and long out of circulation.

### *The reputation*

Vertov's biography, sparsely documented as it is, provides no obvious explanation for his status as a cult figure in some Western film studies. In the late 1950s, however, his name reappeared in Soviet publications, a result, perhaps, of Khrushchev's secret speech in 1956 denouncing Stalin's crimes and the thaw in Soviet life that followed. The first Soviet book on Vertov was published in 1962, followed in 1966 by a Soviet edition of his selected writings dating back to the early 1920s. This edition drew extensively upon material preserved by Vertov's widow. An East German translation of the Soviet edition of 1966 appeared the next year; since then translations of selected items in other languages, French and English to the fore, have grown in frequency.<sup>vii</sup>

Meanwhile the first comprehensive history of Soviet films, *Kino* by Jay Leyda, which was published in 1960, included scattered references to Vertov whom Leyda had met when he

attended film school in Moscow in 1933-34. Leyda paid tribute to Vertov as a pioneer in the use of actuality images, crediting him with a poetic feeling for this kind of film. In France also in the 1960s, a new wave of film directors discovered an interest in Vertov's theories, translating Vertov's term *Kinopravda* into the French *cinéma-vérité*, whence it attached itself to a documentary mode that for a while enjoyed considerable success on television in America and Britain. In 1963 Georges Sadoul, a Marxist film critic of long standing, published a bio-filmography of Vertov in *Cahiers de Cinéma*, together with a translation of one of his manifestos. In these and other pieces Sadoul promoted Vertov's reputation and the *Kinopravda*-*cinéma-vérité* connection.<sup>viii</sup> In 1967 the first retrospective screenings of Vertov's films took place in Austria.<sup>ix</sup>

During the 1960s, then, Vertov's posthumous reputation grew exponentially with the expansion of film studies. By 1974, when his history of the "nonfiction" film was published, entitled *Documentary*, Erik Barnouw saw fit to devote fourteen pages of text and illustrations to Vertov, a proportion matched only by his segment on Robert Flaherty, the American documentary filmmaker best known for his film about Eskimos, *Nanook of the North* (1922).<sup>x</sup> With the Soviet Union now releasing Vertov films to archives and circulating libraries, the secondary literature promoting their use upgraded Vertov's stature even further. One American film catalogue described him as "the father of the documentary film, and aside from Eisenstein the most powerful personality in Soviet film history," while in the catalog of New York's Museum of Modern Art we can read "The Soviet filmmaker and theorist Dziga Vertov is now recognized alongside Robert Flaherty as a major progenitor of the documentary."<sup>xi</sup>

Most film instructors and students are likely to be impressed by such statements, bearing as they do institutional authority and supported, as they can be, by testimonials from the few Westerners who knew Vertov when they were in Moscow in the 1930s. In *Kino* Leyda wrote that Vertov has "a permanent place in all film history," while Herbert Marshall, a British purveyor of Soviet film culture for more than half a century, described him as "the documentary genius of the Russian Revolution, who influenced the whole world of documentary film."<sup>xii</sup>

Finally, in 1984 a selection of Vertov's writings including many polemical pieces was published in an English translation by the University of California Press with the title *Kino-Eye, The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, edited by Annette Michelson, an instructor at New York University and one of the founding editors of *October*, a magazine named for Eisenstein's film. In a lengthy introduction, in the arcane language deemed appropriate for this kind of work, Michelson elevated Vertov to a pitch of unrivaled intellectual and artistic grandeur; his destiny, according to her, was to be the Trotsky, but alas not the Lenin, of cinema. "Of all the great innovators of the Soviet cinema, none speaks so directly to the issues of our time as Dziga Vertov" - says the blurb on the back cover of this publication; while inside, Michelson can write:

The evolution of his work renders insistently concrete, as in a series of kinetic icons, that philosophic phantasm of the reflexive consciousness: the eye seeing, apprehending itself as it constitutes the world's visibility: the eye transformed by the revolutionary project into an agent of critical production.<sup>xiii</sup>

Revolutionary projects, it's clear, transform minds into exceptionally uncritical objects. It's hardly to be wondered at if the Soviets, seeing in Western academic fields such fertile soil for artistic disinformation, co-operate in the release of select documents by or about Vertov and make some of his films available for study.

But the texts that the Soviets have provided enable us at least to clarify some important points about Vertov, important, that is, now that his name has entered Western text books in this uncritical manner. It is clear, for example, that Vertov saw himself primarily as a protagonist in a political battle, whose field of action was film:

The Council of Three [Vertov, his wife, and his brother], basing itself politically on the communist program, is striving to instill cinema with the ideas underlying Leninism .... (*Kino-Eye* 34)

With the skillful organization of factual footage, we can create film-objects of *high propagandistic pressure*.... (*Kino-Eye* 48, Vertov's emphasis)

In the area of vision: the facts ... are organized by film editors according to party instructions.... (*Kino-Eye* 49)

There is no question, then, that Vertov saw himself as a dutiful servant of the Party. He wrote elsewhere that the film screen was a "platform" onto which "soviet reality" was to be projected. This "soviet reality" was the "communist decoding of the world", a favorite phrase with Vertov.<sup>xiv</sup>

Vertov's main pitch in the polemical battles he waged against his colleagues who were making fiction films was a remark attributed to Lenin by Lunacharsky, the Bolshevik commissar of education, in which Lenin appeared to favor newsreel propaganda as a means of indoctrinating the masses.<sup>xv</sup> Let them enjoy some bourgeois-style entertainment, the argument ran, to entice them into movie theaters, and then hit them with Communist propaganda by way of "factual" films. Vertov's idea, which he claimed was Lenin's also, for what should constitute these "factual" films was "the screen newspaper," the "political newsreel," the "propagandistic newsreel."<sup>xvi</sup> Vertov called this propagandistic newsreel *Kinopravda*, a movie version of the Party paper, *Pravda*. Literally translated, this comes out in American English as Movietruth, in French as cinéma vérité. But by it Vertov intended only to use the name of the Party's paper to lend standing to his "newsreel," not to invest his work with a genuine philosophy of cinematic reality.

Nevertheless, it has turned out happily for Soviet disinformation tacticians that the literal rendering of *kinopravda* into English and French has diverted attention from its first association with the Bolshevik Party paper and so enabled Vertov to be presented as an original seeker after documentary truth.<sup>xvii</sup> The opposite is in fact the case. In his polemics against fiction films ("poison," "film-moonshine," "film vodka," a "hellish idea" invented by the bourgeoisie "to entertain the masses")<sup>xviii</sup> Vertov advocated capturing "life as it is," by which he meant filming unstaged, that is, unscripted, scenes and scenes where ordinary people are not obviously reacting

to the presence of the camera. These unstaged and unselfconscious images were Vertov's "facts" - "film facts," he called them. They constituted his raw material, which was then to be edited ("according to party instructions") into a visual statement. It was not necessary for the raw material to be edited in the context in which it was shot; quite the reverse. The "film facts" were to be stored away and used whenever the need for a particular shot might arise. They went into a file, as it were, which Vertov called his "creative stockpile," to be available for each new project.<sup>xix</sup>

One of Vertov's trademarks was, in fact, the frequency with which he recycled individual shots and even entire sequences, including titles, in different films. What Vertov had in mind was not the building up of a regular stock shot library, but the centralization of all actuality (nonfiction) filming so that a repertoire of images could be accumulated (under his control) suitable for any doctrinal purpose. If Vertov's approach suggests anything, it points forward to the secret cameras used by the KGB today to fabricate images for blackmail and disinformation. In one revealing passage Vertov almost said as much:

"The work of the movie camera [he meant a candid camera approach to actuality filming] is reminiscent of the work of agents of the GPU [fore-runners of the KGB]."<sup>xx</sup>

Thus Vertov's visual statements were to be statements of pure ideology with no connection to the world of actual events or to the people who supplied the models for his images in the first place. His use of the term "life as it is" was a Leninist code word meaning "the communist decoding of the world."<sup>xxi</sup> Vertov's film language was the visual equivalent of Communist verbal texts; they meant the opposite of what people uninitiated into the code understood by them. (And we must remind ourselves that it was not until the publication of Orwell's *1984* in 1949 that ordinary people had an inkling of the way Communist doubletalk worked). "Life as it is" meant precisely "life as it isn't"; namely, a screen utopia dressed up in the appearances of reality. Not the fantasy of fiction film, to be sure, but the fantasy of "film facts," a more demoralizing fantasy because every viewer of these "facts" in the Soviet Union knew them to be false. Soviet viewers, if there were any, had to experience the daily, grim, real version of "life as it is" in the catastrophe brought upon Russia by Lenin and his heirs. Small wonder, then, that Vertov's films failed as internal propaganda and were shelved; small wonder that Soviet audiences flocked to Western films when they got the chance.<sup>xxii</sup>

But it is for his avant-garde experiments in a new art form, it is often said, that Vertov should be remembered. As is well known, during the first years of Bolshevik rule Russia produced a glittering array of writers, poets, and artists. Most of them, however, quickly understood what lay ahead, even before Lenin's death. One history takes the view that avant-garde enthusiasm in the Revolution had died by the end of 1921, following the death of the poet Alexander Blok.<sup>xxiii</sup> But certainly the suicide in April 1930 of Mayakovsky - who had been among the most exuberant of the new regime's supporters - may be taken as the final blow to artistic hope.

Vertov had clung to Mayakovsky's coat-tails, claiming that he was producing "poetic documentary" in the new medium of film.<sup>xxiv</sup> And Mayakovsky in turn encouraged Vertov. But we cannot seriously compare Vertov's talent with Mayakovsky's. Vertov's style was the rhetoric

of Party propaganda, leading one to suspect that his invoking of avant-garde license was no more than a cover for political hackwork. Vertov's devotion to the regime was never in doubt; throughout his career he remained a Party-line man. He would have aligned himself with Mayakovsky and other hard-liners when they called for "a literary Cheka" to deal with independent spirits like Bulgakov and Zamyatin.<sup>xxv</sup> Nor did Vertov dissent from the Soviet film directors, Eisenstein included, who in 1928 called for "firm ideological dictatorship in the field of cinema."<sup>xxvi</sup> Later in life, when he was virtually forgotten, his diary shows a certain wistful plea for artistic talent (presumably his own), but in the period in which he was actively engaged in propaganda work, Vertov's stance is that of a dutiful Soviet operative.

The English language volume of Vertov's writings, then, reveals a person lacking in intellectual depth and untroubled by moral doubts. As a young man, Vertov embraced Communism without hesitation, as members of the Hitler youth embraced Nazism, and his adulation of the leader, Lenin in his case, remained undiminished until his own death. Vertov does not emerge from his own texts as an artistic free spirit crushed by orthodoxy but as a man whose early enthusiasm for a new medium, film, never matured. As is the case with many intellectuals attracted to the mass media, Vertov displayed contempt for his audience. For him, as for so many others, the attraction was power.

### *Two films*

If Vertov's influence on the documentary idea was as significant as his present-day admirers would have us believe, we must look for evidence in his films. Collections of these are to be found in several archives outside the Soviet Union. The Soviets began making them available toward the end of the 1960s, doctoring the films as a matter of course before releasing them. In the United States one of the best collections is in the Museum of Modern Art in New York, an institution that gave active support to the documentary idea in the 1930s. The Museum has six Vertov films, a holding of such unusual size as to invite the question: on whose judgments, and on what grounds, was this acquisition policy decided?<sup>xxvii</sup>

With films generally, great caution is necessary in forming judgments on the basis of written descriptions, and this caution is especially necessary over all material emanating from Soviet sources. Detailed, critical viewing of Vertov's films is difficult and exhausting; differences in language and culture can give rise to mistaken interpretations and two people may well respond in opposite ways to the same visual experience. What is at issue here, however, is not aesthetic theory, but truth - the truth behind films that purport to be documentaries.

It's safe to say that few of the film instructors who repeat Vertov's praises have seen many of his films; fewer still, one might add, are sufficiently knowledgeable of Soviet history to be able to evaluate them in their political context. And yet no aesthetic judgments can properly be made without reference to the political context. In this respect, it will be enough to consider here two Vertov films that are available for public circulation through the Museum of Modern Art, *Kinopravda* and *Enthusiasm, Symphony of the Don Basin*.

(1) *Kinopravda*

The Museum of Modern Art's *Kinopravda* film is a composite reel of fragments from several early issues of Vertov's "propagandistic newsreel." They were acquired by the Museum of Modern Art in the 1930s and they seem to be the only *Kinopravda* material of their kind available for public inspection in the United States - indeed, the only *Kinopravda* material from 1922 that anyone has seen. There are six items in this composite reel: the reopening of a trolley line in Moscow; tanks used in leveling a field, destined, we're told, for an airport, also in Moscow; scenes from the trial of the Social Revolutionaries; an item described as "organizing the peasants to join the commune"; scenes of a sanitarium where war-wounded receive therapy; and shots of starving children huddled close to a railroad. These six items are preceded by a statement by the Museum telling us about *Kinopravda*, followed in turn by a *Kinopravda* title sequence. At the end of the composite reel, we see a group of technicians hoisting a screen onto trolley wires, with captions that read: "For enquiries regarding traveling film shows ... write to KINOPRAVDA" (no address is given).

Every piece of critical writing on *Kinopravda* to be found in Western textbooks is a judgment on these fragments, amplified by perusal of written lists based on Soviet documents. Vertov produced some longer issues, to which he gave the *Kinopravda* title, and a film *Kino-Glaz* (Cinema-Eye, 1924), which seems to duplicate *Kinopravda* material. In each case, however, the essential propaganda forms are conventional.

These hardly constitute grounds for describing Vertov as the founder of "a new kind of journalism."<sup>xxviii</sup> In terms of film technique, the shots in the Museum's *Kinopravda* reel are well composed and the editing displays vitality, some sequences having been obviously filmed with editing in mind. Good technique should cause no surprise, however, since by 1922 newsreel camera work was of a high standard everywhere; among operators in the Soviet Union were several who went on to feature work, Edward Tisse, Eisenstein's cameraman, among them. What should be noted, however, is the evidence of visual continuity displayed in the shooting and editing (different angles on and details of a single piece of action), since visual continuity of this kind is proof not of a hidden or unobserved camera which might illustrate Vertov's so-called "life as it is" but of open intervention by the cameraman in obtaining his material. Not only do you have to instruct your subject how to look, but you have to ask him or her to repeat the action several times over, to wait until you're ready or to keep going until you have finished. In other words, this kind of filming requires its own artifice as does shooting actors in a fiction film. As the Dutch Communist filmmaker Joris Ivens put it after a life time's experience: "staging begins when you say to the man, 'Don't look at the camera.'"<sup>xxix</sup>

While the shots of children in the museum's reel are certainly poignant - they look like concentration-camp victims, and they remind us of the five million lives that were lost in the famine that followed the Bolsheviks' seizure of power - and while we can recognize in the sequence of mutilated patients being fitted with artificial limbs the fascination that machines held for Vertov as for many of his contemporaries in Europe, the fragments in this composite reel tell us nothing further about their subject matter, nor are they of themselves of historical interest. What is remarkable about the *Kinopravda* series, however, judging from written lists of its contents, is precisely this absence of historically significant material. With the telling exception

of the trial of the Social Revolutionaries, *Kinopravda* shows little awareness of the events or the people that were shaping the new Soviet state. To borrow Sherlock Holmes's remark to Watson, it is the absence of the dog barking in the night that provides us with the essential clue to *Kinopravda*. In the whole series, there is virtually no sign of Lenin or his associates at work, nothing to show what was really going on at that time. What *Kinopravda* reveals in this negative fashion is the obsession with secrecy that has from the outset been the hallmark of Soviet rule. Vertov's activities confirm that control of every means of public information has always been a primary objective of Party policy, one that Lenin, more than any other leader, insisted on.

For this reason the appearance of scenes from the trial of the Social Revolutionaries in the Museum of Modern Art's reel of *Kinopravda* is highly significant. According to shot lists based on Soviet sources, Vertov included items dealing with this trial in seven of the first eight issues of *Kinopravda*, an emphasis that draws attention to itself and which must reflect the political instructions that Vertov was following. It is not hard to guess at what lay behind these instructions.

As the major revolutionary party to emerge in Russia before 1917, and the one that played the key role in the events that led to the abdication of the Czar and the formation of a republican government between March and October 1917, the Social Revolutionaries formed the only party that had any popular following among the peasants, who made up the majority of the Russian population. Although they opposed Lenin on certain major issues and were outmanoeuvred by the Bolsheviks, who were far fewer in numbers, the Social Revolutionaries cooperated briefly with the Bolsheviks and withheld their opposition to them during the Civil War. But once the Civil War was over and Lenin decided to return to a semblance of republican norms with the New Economic Policy, it became essential for the Bolshevik leaders - never popular with the masses and mostly unknown to them - to eliminate their more popular rivals. The Social Revolutionaries had been granted amnesty for their earlier misdeeds, but Lenin had meanwhile arranged for a new criminal code, adopted in May 1922, to come into effect on June 1 the same year. Under this new code a number of leaders of the Social Revolutionaries were immediately arrested. Their trial opened the same month, on June 8, attracting a great deal of international attention. It was, of course, to be a show trial, with Lenin personally involved in the arrangements, which included planting agents provocateurs among the defendants. Lenin was the harshest of all in his demands for the death penalty. In August, after two months of public display, the defendants were duly found guilty, fourteen of their number being sentenced to death, a sentence that was "suspended" at the request of foreign Communists.<sup>xxx</sup>

Is it a coincidence that the opening of the trial coincided with the opening of Vertov's *Kinopravda* and that the first eight issues of his "newsreel" appeared over the ten week period of the trial, a regularity of appearance never achieved again during *Kinopravda's* existence?<sup>xxx</sup> Of course not. Vertov was instructed to publicize their guilt. Nor can the item on peasants organizing themselves into a commune, which in the Museum of Modern Art's reel immediately follows the trial scenes, be without significance. At the tenth Party conference in 1921, Radek had openly stated that the "enormous mass" of peasants were bitterly opposed to the Bolsheviks.<sup>xxxii</sup> Since it was among the peasants that the Social Revolutionaries were strongest, we can assume that Vertov was following Party instructions in these blatantly fabricated scenes, possibly relayed to him by Koltsov who was now influential at Pravda. It had been Koltsov, you will remember,

who had introduced Vertov to propaganda film work; it was now Koltsov who promoted Vertov's output in the pages of Pravda.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

To present Vertov as an avant-garde artist, fired by revolutionary ardor and keen to experiment in a new medium, is therefore manifestly a false reading of the historical situation. Vertov loyally served Party needs. One wonders, indeed, whether to engage in his kind of "documentary" filming Vertov or one of his associates would have had to have been part of the secret police apparatus, which from 1925, at least, began to interest itself in the production and distribution of propaganda films to local factory and office cells.<sup>xxxiv</sup> From his *Kinopravda* reels, Vertov compiled a longer version of the trial of the Social Revolutionaries, an indication of its propaganda importance. That Vertov personally identified himself with the Party line in this trial, fully approving of the fate of the Social Revolutionaries, is evident from a scene included in the Museum of Modern Art's reel. Here Vertov allowed himself to appear in the shot, ostensibly as a bystander reading a newspaper account of the trial proceedings. It should be noted that there is nothing avant-garde about this episode in film history; on the contrary, inserting himself in this way into his own camera's lens was something Vertov theoretically deplored, and this fact charges the scene with ominous symbolism - it is a faked shot at a rigged trial.

In the light of this, the Museum of Modern Art's note on its *Kinopravda* reel seems particularly unfortunate:

Vertov sought to exhort his audience, especially to make them aware of social ills, but he invited their participation without explaining or interpreting events for them as did conventional newsreels - even when his subject is a trial of social revolutionaries. Honoring Vertov's example, Jean Rouch translated "kino pravda" into French to give us the term *cinéma vérité*.<sup>xxxv</sup>

*Cinéma "falsité"* (to coin a word) would be more to the point.

## (2) *Enthusiasm, Symphony of the Don Basin*

Between 1926 when he made his last film for the state film studio in Moscow and some time after 1932 when he returned to Moscow to work for Münzenberg's Mezhrabpom Film, Vertov's operational base appears to have been in the Ukraine. One of the films he made during this period, *The Man With The Movie Camera*, is often shown to students because of the technical tricks Vertov used to demonstrate the illusionistic nature of the film medium. He intended the film to be a cinematic statement in support of his brand of propaganda film, an attack on his rivals in the Soviet film industry in the competition for funds and Party favor. While the film is much overpraised by Vertov's Western admirers, and is falsely described by the Museum of Modern Art as "a documentary on the nature of socialist society,"<sup>xxxvi</sup> it need not detain us now. Its value for disinformation purposes lies in the context in which Vertov himself is presented. But Vertov's next film, also made under the auspices of the Ukraine Film Studio, is a different matter. He called it *Enthusiasm, Symphony of the Don Basin*. Vertov began work on it in the autumn of 1929. It was his first sound film, for which his youthful studies in music and early experiments in sound recording had long prepared him.

*Enthusiasm* purports to be a picture of how the workers of the Don Basin, the industrial heart of the Ukraine, set about meeting in four years, one year in advance, the target set for them under Stalin's first five year plan, which was announced in April/May 1929. But Vertov did not follow the path of realism; instead his film is a kind of celluloid ode to industry set to music and accompanied by brass bands, parades and speeches in synchronous sound. At least, this is the central portion of the film, but it opens and closes with sequences that do not obviously belong to the industrial theme.

Early segments of the film concern the church. Vertov contrasts images of religious worship with images of factory work. The former are ridiculed with swaying camera movements, the latter emphasized by firm shots and strong editing. Church music is distorted and superseded by factory sirens; a church building is dismantled and turned into a workers' club. Modernity in the form of radio dispels the icons of the past. Vertov shoots scenes of drunks and old women crossing themselves in a visually provocative manner, as if we were looking at the church through a drunkard's eyes.

The closing segment of *Enthusiasm* is enigmatic, but since as much as 27 minutes may be missing from the Museum of Modern Art's print, we can't be certain what Vertov intended its final shape to be.<sup>xxxvii</sup> What we have is a mixture of industrial images, the shouted slogans of shock brigades and scenes from the countryside, though it is unclear what the last signify. There are shots of women dancing in a field, one of whom appears to be intoxicated, women loading hay into an antique-looking mechanical baler and then leaving with their forks and rakes. These scenes have a disconnected quality, as if they belonged to another film from a different time and place. Given what we know of conditions in the Ukraine at this time, they probably were taken elsewhere.

While *Enthusiasm* may have archival value as one of the first Soviet attempts to manipulate sound together with the other elements of the filmmaker's craft, it comes to us from a place and a time which raise in acute form Vertov's sensibility as a Soviet propagandist. For this was the very moment when Russia entered the darkest period of her modern history, and it was in the Ukraine that the most tragic consequences were felt of Stalin's new policies of rapid industrialization and enforced collectivization of farming.

In his devastating book, *The Harvest of Sorrow*, the historian Robert Conquest has documented the horrific course of this disaster. Writing of himself at the opening of his book, Conquest says his task "has often been so distressing that he has sometimes hardly felt able to proceed." He quotes Pasternak, who made a trip to the countryside hoping to write about the new life of the collective farms. "What I saw," wrote Pasternak in his memoirs, "could not be expressed in words. There was such inhuman, unimaginable misery, such a terrible disaster, that it began to seem almost abstract, it would not fit within the bounds of consciousness. I fell ill. For an entire year I could not write." Conquest calculates that some fourteen million people died during the period 1929-1933, as terror-famine struck the Ukraine in a deliberate move by Stalin to crush the Ukrainian national spirit and bend the Ukrainian people to the will of the Party in Moscow. Thus the Ukraine became during this period one vast Auschwitz.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

It is inconceivable that Vertov was unaware of this tragedy as it began to unfold around him during his work for the Ukraine film studio. It's not impossible that he was originally transferred to the Ukraine because the central Party leadership needed a reliable stalwart from Moscow in place there, one who would not succumb to local Ukrainian sympathies. We have to imagine him with his cameras and primitive sound gear turning his back on the thousands dying of starvation in the villages and the terror and brutalization of those who survived. We have to imagine, standing in the shadows out of the range of his cameras, the army of secret police and Party cadres who enforced collectivization, sending thousands more to the Gulag and the execution yards of the GPU (KGB). Instead Vertov mouths the slogans of the regime, he gives us brass bands and talks of shock brigades and fulfilling quotas. *Enthusiasm* is a truly Orwellian film. It is the cinematic counterpart to the official doubletalk that described the genocide by famine as "consumer asceticism."<sup>xxxix</sup>

Most film texts that champion Vertov make no reference to the Ukrainian tragedy nor do they provide clues to the political context in which *Enthusiasm* was commissioned. As with *Kinopravda's* treatment of the Social Revolutionaries, however, Vertov was following closely the Party line handed down by the central leadership, now in effect Stalin. In 1928 a new series of rigged trials began, "wreckers' trials," aimed at intimidating managers and workers alike. Do Vertov's synchronous speeches hint at threats that others may not be doing their soviet duty in getting the coal out from the Don Basin to relieve shortages elsewhere? It seems probable. In April and May 1929 laws were passed inaugurating a new offensive against the Church. Vertov obliges by his opening segment encouraging the destruction of churches and their conversion to workers clubs.<sup>xl</sup>

In *Enthusiasm* there are some remarkable moments when industrial sounds and pictures come together, but to discuss the film in terms of aesthetics, as most study programs do, is to miss its point. The Museum of Modern Art introduces it as a "film about the Don Basin," but of course it is not "about" the significant reality of what was going on at that time in the Ukraine, where the Don Basin is situated. The film is not "about" anything connected with the actual world of terror-famine, forced labor and industrial chaos. The Museum of Modern Art's silence on this matter endorses the film's disinformation message.<sup>xli</sup>

### *The myth*

Vertov's reputation, then, has benefited from an intellectual consensus that in the 1920s the Soviet Union was a place of artistic experimentation in film. It has become the accepted lore of film studies that Soviet film directors of this period, Eisenstein in particular, invented editing techniques that are now standard film practice. This is a subject for another enquiry. Relevant to the question of Vertov, however, is the manner in which Eisenstein's contemporaries in the West treated his films as documentaries. Vertov was thus the beneficiary also of the campaign waged by John Grierson in Britain for a government supported documentary film unit to publicize the humanity and professional skills of working men and women. Grierson argued forcibly from Soviet examples, singling out for special notice Eisenstein's *Potemkin* and Victor Turin's *Turksib* (1929). It did not occur to anyone at the time to point out that the most sensational scene in *Potemkin*, the massacre on the Odessa steps, was pure invention, and that the climax of *October*, the storming of the Winter Palace, was likewise a carefully directed piece of dramatic fiction.

It must now be said that to describe Vertov as a pioneer of documentary reporting, as Barnouw does in *Documentary*, his influential survey of "the non-fiction film," is grotesque.<sup>xliii</sup> It is turning the meaning of words inside out, like Soviet newspeak. Barnouw, otherwise a reliable guide, has here fallen victim to artistic disinformation, taking such Vertov texts as he has come across at their face value, while ignoring the political circumstances in which Vertov operated.

It would be more to the point to argue that in almost every respect European and American film practices were the formative influences on Soviet directors, Vertov included. His cinematic tricks were certainly anticipated by George Méliès, the French producer of film fantasies, active before 1914, and by Ferdinand Zecca, the director of the enormously popular Pathé films that dominated the world market in the same period. We can imagine Eisenstein and Vertov as teenagers being entranced by the magic of film illusionism long before they thought of making their own careers in the medium. It is well known that Griffith's *Intolerance* made a great impact on the Soviets when a print of this famous film arrived in Moscow in 1919. The new generation of Soviet directors studied American cutting techniques in which such basic concepts as parallel editing and montage effects had been worked out long before the Russian revolution.<sup>xliiii</sup>

The truth is, there is no evidence that Vertov had any influence over the documentary idea, either in the Soviet Union or elsewhere. When Sadoul declared that Vertov's international reputation was "immense" and that the British especially were "profoundly influenced" by him, we may detect one source of those false statements that have gone into the making of a Vertov myth.<sup>xliv</sup> Enough examples have been given of the distortions in the Museum of Modern Art's approach to Vertov to suggest a similar influence at work in this otherwise excellent institution. Even films that directly followed Soviet propaganda requirements, like Ivens' *The Spanish Earth*, show no aesthetic affinity to Vertov's films. Ivens, indeed, did not subscribe to Vertov's ideas.<sup>xlv</sup> If Vertov can claim to be an innovator, it is in one respect only: his use of what purport to be actuality or factual shots to make deliberately fraudulent statements.

This being the case, it needs saying that Vertov's place is clearly with those other fabricators of cinematic lies, the Nazis. It is in this context, and this only, that his work merits attention. Inhabitants of the same moral universe, Nazi and Soviet propagandists had a great deal in common. Vertov's idea of a political newsreel which he contrasted with the commercial newsreels of Pathé and Gaumont ("newspaper chronicles") were actually fulfilled in the Nazi newsreel of the late 1930s, which reversed the order of items from normal commercial practice, and built instead from lightweight lead items to a politically significant climax at the end.<sup>xlvi</sup> Sound, of course, helped the Nazi method, but the same totalitarian mentality lay behind Vertov's thinking. Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*, it can hardly be denied, was a more accomplished product than *Three Songs Of Lenin*, but the two films are remarkably similar in their glorification of the leader and of power represented by the leader, the *führer* principle. And this similarity is not just manifest in the subject matter of the films, it lay behind the almost mystical faith each filmmaker had in the leader's vision for the medium of film itself.<sup>xlvii</sup> In both films the leader was given a mythological presence, more striking in the case of Hitler because the visual material was stronger.<sup>xlviii</sup>

In this respect discussing Vertov's aesthetics without mentioning the Gulag Archipelago is like dwelling on the architectural features of Nazi gas chambers without saying what they were used for.<sup>xlix</sup> In 1934, when the Riefenstahl and Vertov films appeared, the worst crimes of the Nazis lay in the future, beyond the imagination of Western Europeans and Americans; those of Lenin and Stalin, however, had already been committed, although concealed behind the smoke screen of false words, false news, false films. Vertov's celebration of Stalin's "Plan" in *Enthusiasm* should thus more accurately be compared with the Nazi wartime film *The Führer Gives A City To The Jews*, made at the bogus Theresienstadt camp to fool the Red Cross and neutrals. It's as if, in the shadow of the barbed wire and crematoria of Auschwitz, Vertov were to extol the virtues of the SS, praising their love of dogs, their fondness of Beethoven, their smart uniforms. And indeed, in Western film journals there are those who can write of Vertov's film, as one Lucy Fischer did in *Film Quarterly* a few years ago: "It is an ode to the cooperative enthusiasm of Soviet workers."<sup>l</sup>

### *The radical legacy*

As a result of the Second World War, the fate of Nazi and Soviet films has undergone a strange reversal, reminding us of the saying that history is the propaganda of the victor. Nazi films, in their day a great propaganda success, are now viewed with critical detachment. Considered in their historical context, they greatly add to our understanding of the period in which they were made as well as of the psychology of mass persuasion. But Vertov's films, insignificant and indeed barely visible in their day, have emerged as a vehicle for a renewed assault on Western values. It is to this aspect of Vertov's case that we must finally turn.

References to Vertov are now embedded in nearly all modern textbooks and film study programs, most of them following the false evaluation of him that we have been discussing. Much of this attention can be attributed to a kind of film snobbery coupled with ignorance; it is so much easier to repeat what is said by others than to have to make one's own judgments, and what is said by others, particularly when it includes the word "avant-garde," has a kind of insider appeal. The inaccessibility of much of the original material aids this process.

No great harm would come from this if it were simply a debate on aesthetic theory. It goes without saying that people differ in their emotional response to an audio-visual experience like a film, and academic theorists will differ in their judgments on the films we have been discussing - and these films, it needs repeating, never claimed attention as popular entertainment.

But this is not simply a debate on aesthetic theory. For we find that today's interest in Vertov also stems from a political agenda held by a new generation of men and women whose sights are set on the mass media with purposes rather similar to Vertov's. Since Vertov's rhetoric was largely fraudulent, since his probity was questionable, this use of his name for political purposes must be challenged.

Typical of the approach of this new generation of political activists is a collection of essays published in 1984 under the title *Show Us Life*, a phrase of Vertov's, edited by a Thomas Waugh, "professor of film studies at Concordia University, Montreal." In his introduction Waugh refers to a meeting in 1979 of "more than 500 radical media activists from the U.S. and

Canada" at which more than 85 films were shown, 70 of them described as documentaries. Evidently the meeting led to the publication of the essays five years later.<sup>li</sup>

Of the twenty-six contributors to this volume thirteen appear to be connected with academic institutions, another two are listed as "teacher and activist," and the remainder are involved in one way or another with the media. There is no way of knowing what is the present number of adherents to this program but from the emphasis on the teaching of film revealed in this case it's reasonable to assume there are like-minded people to be found in teaching outlets across the country, especially where course offerings isolate film theory and criticism from political history.

In addition to infiltrating academic and media institutions, the activists' program is designed for a rag-bag army of malcontents, itemized by Waugh as follows:

"poor" and marginal film-makers/users, both those working within the framework of the traditional left and workers' movements, and those within the progressive mass movement of the seventies and eighties: the women's movement; minority, anti-racist and national movements, the environmental/anti-nuke/peace movement; lesbian and gay liberation groups; and other resistance movements enlisting prisoners, consumers, welfare recipients, immigrants, the handicapped, the elderly, the unemployed, and others on down the endless list of those disenfranchised under patriarchal capitalism.<sup>liii</sup>

For all these groups, Vertov is invoked as "the founding parent of radical documentary." Among his latter-day followers we find the same kind of doubletalk as he used for his "political newsreel" or "propagandistic newsreel" with its "communist decoding of the world." While we are given no clear exposition of what is meant by "radical documentary," the phrase itself and others like it ("documentary activism," "committed documentarists," "film activism") alert us to the false consciousness behind the movement. The commitment is not to documentary integrity, or to an aesthetic ideal, but to an ideology, the "goal of radical socio-political transformation." In its contempt for popular culture and media institutions this language, often flavored with the latest semiotic jargon, closely resembles Vertov's position.

What our study of Vertov, then, reveals is that both in theory and in practice, in the writing of film history and film criticism, in the instruction given to film students, a subversive political agenda may often lie behind the honor accorded to the name of Dziga Vertov. For the Soviets, promoting Vertov's reputation as an original and creative documentary filmmaker has turned out to be more effective in terms of artistic disinformation than were his films in his lifetime as propaganda. In the period between the two world wars, Soviet films found their most appreciative audiences in Western film societies, which Communists and fellow travellers took an active role in founding, and then using for propaganda purposes. But while the workers' film clubs of the 1930s collapsed when Comintern funds and support were withdrawn following changes in Stalin's foreign policy, there is no sign that the credit rating of early Soviet film propagandists will suffer a similar fate. It therefore behooves college faculties and the general editors of textbooks to take another look at what is being sanctioned in this field in the name of higher education.

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- i Feldman, S. *Dziga Vertov, a guide to references and resources*, Boston, G.K.Hall 1979, has the main biographical facts based on the author's reading of Soviet sources which he lists in this volume. Hereafter referred to as *Feldman Guide*. Feldman wrote his doctoral thesis on Vertov, under Leyda's tutelage, which was published by the Arno Press, New York 1977, entitled *Evolution of style in the early work of Dziga Vertov*.
- ii Marshall, H. *Masters of the Soviet Cinema*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1983, 64
- iii *Feldman Guide* has a detailed breakdown of all *Kinopravda* issues, though he has seen only a few of them. *Kino-Eye: the writings of Dziga Vertov*, edited and introduced by A. Michelson, University of California Press 1984, includes many of Vertov's own references to *Kinopravda*. See for example 32 and 51.
- iv *Kino-Eye* 60-61, 168
- v Gross, B. *Willi Münzenberg: A Political Biography*. Michigan State University Press 1974, 167
- vi *Feldman Guide* 16, 122
- vii *Feldman Guide* gives this publishing history. Virtually everything written about Vertov since his death has been based on these Soviet sources.
- viii Sadoul, G. *Cahiers du Cinéma*, 24 & 25, Nos. 144 & 145 (June & August) 1963. Sadoul's various pieces on Vertov, including the bio-filmography, were edited into a single volume, and published after his death with a preface by Jean Rouch. Sadoul, G. *Dziga Vertov*. Paris: éditions champs libre 1971. *Feldman Guide* 157 says Sadoul's "dates and titles are often at variance with other sources."
- ix Kubelka, P. "Restoring Enthusiasm." *Film Quarterly*, 31, No 2 (Winter) 1977
- x Barnouw, E. *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film*. Oxford University Press 1974
- xi Audio-Brandon/Macmillan 1978, 486; Museum of Modern Art *Circulating Film Library Catalog* 1984, 109
- xii Leyda, J. *Kino*. 3rd edition, London: Allen & Unwin 1983, 161; Marshall, 223
- xiii *Kino-Eye* xix
- xiv *Kino-Eye* 41, 46, 50, 66
- xv Leyda 160-61; *Feldman Guide* 9
- xvi *Kino-Eye* 10, 20, 54
- xvii Thus in 1987 Harvard University advertised a screening of *Kinopravda* as follows: "FILM TRUTH/*Kino Pravda* ... The title, FILM TRUTH, epitomizes Vertov's doctrine that the proletarian cinema must be based on truth - 'fragments of actuality' - assembled for meaningful impact."
- xviii *Kino-Eye* 61, 62, 67
- xix *Kino-Eye* 57, 204
- xx *Kino-Eye* 69
- xxi *Kino-Eye* 49-50
- xxii Vertov himself often complained that few people saw his films, that his practical achievement was "insignificant", that only a "paltry number of prints" of *Kinopravda* were made (*Kino-Eye* 37, 44).
- xxiii Heller, M. and Nekrich, A. *Utopia in Power*. English language edition, New York: Summit Books 1986, 193. Hereafter referred to as *Utopia*.
- xxiv *Kino-Eye* 183-5. For Vertov's toadying up to Mayakovsky, *Kino-Eye* 180

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- xxv *Utopia* 199-200
- xxvi *Utopia* 275
- xxvii According to the curator of the Museum's archive, its Vertov films were acquired as follows: *The Man With The Movie Camera* and *Enthusiasm* in 1969; *Kino-Glaz*, *Shagai*, *Soviet!* and *One Sixth Of The World* in 1979. Items from *Kinopravda* were acquired in the 1930s "from an American dealer in old film." Feldman *Guide* gives details of the discrepancies in the lengths of the films that he has seen in archives compared with what those lengths would have been if their original shot lists were accurate.
- xxviii As Barnouw does, 55. Feldman *Guide* gives descriptions of the contents of all 23 *Kinopravda* issues, based mostly on Soviet sources and partly on his own viewing of a few longer numbers. His lists are useful for the discussion that follows.
- xxix Ivens, J. *The Camera and I*. Berlin: Seven Seas Books 1969, 228
- xxx Solzhenitsyn, A. *The Gulag Archipelago*, Vol. 1. London: Fontana 1974, 352ff
- xxxi Solzhenitsyn, *ibid* 367, comments on the 60 issues of *Pravda* devoted to the trial
- xxxii Conquest, R. *Lenin*. London: Fontana 1972, 106-7
- xxxiii Leyda 177-8
- xxxiv Taylor, R. *Film Propaganda*. New York: Barnes & Noble 1979, 57
- xxxv Museum catalog 109-110
- xxxvi Museum catalog 112
- xxxvii Feldman *Guide* gives a detailed description of the film and discusses its length, 110-115
- xxxviii Conquest, R. *The Harvest of Sorrow*. Oxford University Press 1986, 10 for his own and Pasternak's distress and chapter 16 "The Death Roll". *Utopia* 235 calls it "this first socialist genocide."
- xxxix *Utopia* 236, 234, 226
- xl *Utopia* 208, 224
- xli Museum catalog 113
- xlii Barnouw 67
- xliii Leyda 142, 172
- xliv Sadoul 98, 106
- xlv Ivens 75
- xlvi Fielding, R. *The American Newsreel 1911-1967*. University of Oklahoma Press 1972, 229. *Kino-Eye* 20
- xlvii Taylor op.cit. 177 for Riefenstahl.
- xlviii See *Utopia* 232-3 for Hitler as the model used by Radek for the cult of Stalin.
- xlix Note the savage effect achieved by Alain Resnais in *Night and Fog* when he plays with the architecture of the death camps.
- l Lucy Fischer "Enthusiasm: From Kino-eye to Radio-eye" in *Film Quarterly*, Vol 31, No. 2 (Winter) 1977
- li Waugh xii and xxvi
- lii Waugh xiii