

SPINNING TOP THE LEGACY OF DZIGA VERTOV KEEPS MOVING

BY MÓNICA SAVIRÓN

There will always be artists who absorb the power of Dziga Vertov's films, and use it to bring refreshing, critical, and poetic perspectives into their work. This is evident in the list of renowned artists and filmmakers who introduce the screenings of the most comprehensive Dziga Vertov retrospective ever assembled in the United States. William Kentridge, Ken Jacobs, Guy Maddin, Peter Kubelka, John MacKay, Yuri Tsivian, and Michael Nyman all help to present this monumental program, organized by the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), in New York, from April 15 through June 4. Their insights into Vertov's work and legacy offer the unusual and often overlooked perspective of those whose own work has been inspired by it. The series includes the U.S. premiere of the newly restored in its original full-frame version, *Man with a Movie Camera*, 11 series of Vertov's silent films, the premieres of 14 *Kino-Week* films from 1918–1919, and all of his *Kino-Pravda* films from 1922–1925. The equivalents of American newsreels and the so-called NO-DOs in Spain during General Franco's dictatorship, several of these *Kino-Pravda* films are celebrated for Vertov's and Aleksandr Rodchenko's ingenious experiments in graphic design. Among the many rediscoveries are the works of Elizaveta Svilova, Vertov's editor and wife, and Esfir Shub, who pioneered "found footage" cinema, and whose expertise was essential in the development of dialectical film montage.

Vertov's philosophy of linking cinema to art and politics was not always so appreciated, especially at the time. To the attacks of his critics, Vertov replied with several papers and a rigorously experimental manifesto:

We, Kinoks, speak about our documentaries as a pathos of facts, an enthusiasm for facts. Kino-Eye is a documentary—deciphering of what is visible, as well as of what is invisible, to the unarmed human eye. Kino-Eye is the opportunity to see the processes of life at any speed. Kino-Eye uses all the shooting methods available to the camera. Rapid shooting, micro-shooting, reverse shooting, animated shooting, shooting in motion, and shooting from completely unexpected angles are handled not as tricks, but as normal, widely used methods. Kino-Eye uses all available means of editing, juxtaposing, and uniting any points in the universe in any chronological order—breaking, if need be, all laws of editing. Slicing into the seeming chaos of life, Kino-Eye attempts to find the answers in life itself. To mount, to tear away with the camera what is most characteristic and expedient, to organize the fragments torn from life into a visually meaningful rhythmic order, a visually meaningful formula, an extracted "I see." ("From Kino-Eye to Radio-Eye," 1929)

In 1979, MoMA celebrated the 60th anniversary of Soviet cinema, and showed key works by Dovzhenko, Kuleshov, Protazanov, Shub, and Vertov. Joshua Siegel, Associate Curator of the Department of Film at MoMA, who organized the current retrospective with scholar Yuri Tsivian, explains the relevance of showing Vertov's works now: "I'm particularly fascinated with the ways in which Vertov's influence has extended beyond cinema in the 21st century. Computer scientists, linguists, mathematicians, and musicologists have used digital technologies in recent years to better understand Vertov's rhythmic editing, and his use of sound, at a granular level, and to explore the relationship of the neurological and the perceptual to the cognitive in his work—something Vertov himself, once a student of science, music, and neuropsychology, would have appreciated."

Man with a Movie Camera, shot in Moscow, Kiev, and Odessa, is a film about the process of filmmaking—the camera is the subject and the object at the same time, and functions as an extension of both the arms and the eyes of the filmmaker. The print begins with an introductory text that describes the film as an "experiment in the cinematic transmission of visual phenomena." Siegel adds: "The EYE Film Institute Netherlands has restored the film, which is drawn from the 35mm print that Vertov used on his tour. Subsequent versions had music imposed on them, which meant that part of the image was cropped to make room for the soundtrack itself. Now audiences will be able to appreciate cameraman Mikhail Kaufman's Constructivist compositions as he had originally framed them." Long before the technology of sound film and television caught up with his innovative ideas, a convincing Vertov declared to the editors of *Kino-front* that "the latest technical discoveries in the field would (eventually) give the supporters and makers of sound documentary chronicles the most powerful weapon in the struggle for an unplayed October."



Kino-Eye (Life Off-Guard), 1924.

Ken Jacobs's film *Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son* is, with Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera*, one of several important works of a reflexive cinema, whose primary subject is an aesthetic exploration of the nature of film itself. Jacobs, who is presenting Vertov's most famous film at MoMA, has devoted much of his own life to exploring the intersection of art, radical cinema, and politics. Many of his films emphasize the hidden possibilities of cinema, including what the Kino-Eye school defined as the construction of a film by "intervals"—that is, "by inter-shot movement, by visual correlation of one shot to another, or by transitions from one visual stimulus to another." Jacobs states:

What drew me to the quest of *Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son* was what couldn't be grasped in the decaying 1905 film (the original 10-minute film was simply called *Tom, Tom*), which was infinite in every way. I think that quest corresponded to Vertov's underlying search for fact, the discovery without necessarily putting "to use" of what-is. He chose to be a propagandist for a social revolution, one I sympathize with, and which at the time showed signs of being possible... *Man with a Movie Camera*...turns Odessa on its head. Why? Because cinema enables it to... *Man with a Movie Camera* is more the product of a poet than of a propagandist.

The idea of shooting the essence of a city—or various cities—has been reinterpreted many times in the history of cinema. Perhaps the best known example is Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*, celebrated for showing the patterns of movement of the German capital. Artist William Kentridge, who is participating in this exhibition as part of a panel, made his own "city symphony," the animated *Johannesburg, 2nd Greatest City After Paris*, a musical reflection on the physical and psychical abuse and degradation of blacks in South Africa. Kentridge's playful creative process shows the absurdity of a world where, as he says, "everything is possible," and where "the impossible is what happens all the time."



Ukrainian poster for *Enthusiasm (Symphony of the Donbas)*, 1930.

Restored and reconstructed by Viennese avant-garde filmmaker Peter Kubelka, Vertov's film *Enthusiasm* will be shown in a version that corrects the synchronization between image and sound, which includes both music and human voice. As writer Simon Koster affirms:

This film is not subdivided chronologically, but consists of themes (march theme, theme of heavy toil, theme of sports, theme of a rest day, etc.) and has been composed of combinations and contrasts of these themes. Vertov places his camera deep under the ground, and sometimes in scorching heat. He climbed upon moving trains. He was present everywhere. With his film eye he saw all without being seen himself.

On the film's soundtrack, the sound of the radio stands in for intertitles over a black screen, as a way of avoiding any associations with literature and other "staged" aspects of fictional storytelling. It is also a feast of sounds recorded outdoors—portable sound-recording apparatus had not yet been devised, so these tracks were recorded by microphones hooked up to Muscovite Radio Centre. Also named *Symphony of the Donbass*, after the region of Eastern Ukraine southwest of the Donets River, *Enthusiasm* documents the workers of that area as they sing to enforce their battle. They claim to accomplish their industrial mission—agricultural tasks, mainly the mining of coal, the production of steel, and the harvesting of wheat. As Jay Leyda notes in *Kino: A History of the Russian and Soviet Film*:

Practically, the film for Vertov was a demonstration of his lyrical method enhanced by sound and music.... The soundtracks they brought back from mines and factories astonished all with their vividness and novelty. Vertov cut these sound-images as freely as he cut his visuals, with a great deal of superimposition, both of picture and track.

Three Songs of Lenin, the last film over which Vertov had total artistic control, is considered a monument to his maturity, and celebrates the revolutionary period in Russia with intense euphoria. It is also his most story-driven film: the structure keeps going back to the image of the bench, in Gorky, where Lenin and Stalin sat and talked, located in the park near the room where Lenin died. This film introduces close-ups of people being interviewed and talking to the camera, including a woman who shares:

I am 63 years old. I produced 916 pounds of wheat. After the harvest, there was a special Party meeting to celebrate. If all honest collective farm workers worked like I do, they would all live well. Comrade Stalin said that women are a powerful force on collective farms. We cannot be held back.

Notably, most of the workers in Vertov's films are women, and women like his second wife and longtime collaborator, Elizaveta Svilova, were also a key part of his "film laboratory." Scholar John MacKay, in his book *Dziga*



Stride, Soviet! 1926.

Vertov: *Life and Work* (Indiana University Press), describes filmmaker Esfir Shub as Vertov's friend and rival:

Some critics pitted her against Vertov, saying that her work was much more economical and effective than his poetic excesses; Vertov himself was very upset when a major documentary project was taken from him in 1927 and given to her. Later, in the early 40s, he was infuriated when she was described as the great "founder" of Soviet documentary at a gathering of filmmakers. They still kept in touch, though, and my sense is that Shub always had deep respect for Vertov, and actually looked up to him. Very importantly, she was pretty much the only person to defend him when he was pilloried as a "cosmopolitan" (i.e., as a Jew, and too much interested in artistic experimentation), and she was criticized herself for standing up for him.

Esfir Shub and Elizaveta Svilova are the subjects of a talk by Annette Michelson on May 4.

Films and life were, for Vertov, one and the same. His passion for the themes that drove his work (women, work, filmmaking, construction, revolution) remained consistent to the end of his days. Whether because of a visionary mind, an innate determination, or both, the legacy of Dziga Vertov (who gave himself this new name—a futurist neologism that means "spinning top") is very much alive: his ideas continue to resonate with filmmakers working today, and are certain to inspire many more films yet to be made. ■

For more information visit: www.moma.org/visit/calendar/films/1165

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Photo: Exhibition of "The Freud Drawings" by Robert Longo at Metro Pictures Gallery, 2001