

A REALISTIC TREND IN THE HISTORY OF CINEMA

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INTRODUCTION

It is over half a century since the word “documentary” was first used by John Grierson to describe a type of factual film¹⁾. Since then a massive body of documentaries of many kinds has been made in all parts of the world. Documentary has now reached a high level of accomplishment, style, and assurance.

Yet documentary has never been a popular form because it does not conform to the public standards of entertainment. To a good part of the public it may imply something educational and boring. In recent years, however, new documentary trends have gained popularity. The most significant trend among them is *cinéma-vérité*.

Cinéma-vérité is of interest to all concerned with realist filmmaking, with film and communication theory, and with the role of the cinema in modern society. To find equivalents for the roots of this new approach, one has to go back to the pioneer work of Dziga Vertov in Soviet Russia. It was not by chance that this form of cinema became known as *cinéma-vérité*, a literal translation of Vertov's watchword, *Kino-Pravda* (Cinema-Truth).

In the following pages, I shall attempt to discuss a realistic trend in the history of cinema. The central aim of this study is to survey the historical and theoretical backgrounds of the most significant trend among varied realistic movements that have made this genre one of the most representative forms of cinematic expression; first to trace Vertov's significance and accomplishment in the history of documentary film; to indicate his influence on a new documentary trend that came to be called *cinéma-vérité*; to provide analysis and interpretation of *cinéma-vérité*; and finally to offer an insight into the present state of this realistic trend. The discussion will begin with Vertov's philosophy of documentary. The full importance of his theories and ideas will be traced and evaluated here in Part I.

PART I

VERTOV'S PHILOSOPHY OF DOCUMENTARY

A. From Newsreel (*Kino-Nedelia*) to Documentary (*Kino-Pravda*)

Denis Arkadievich Kaufman (born 1896), known in film history as Dziga Vertov, was one of three sons of a librarian in Bialystock, in the Polish part of the Russian empire. Early in the First World War the family moved to Russia to escape from war dangers. In Petrograd young Denis studied medicine and psychology and wrote poetry influenced by Russia's futurist poets, among whom Mayakovsky was the leader²⁾.

Then, in adolescence, Denis's intention to futurist poetry turned into "a passion for the montage of stenograms and phonograms; an interest in the possibilities of transcribing in words and letters the sound of a waterfall, a saw, etc."³⁾

In 1916-17 Denis Kaufman organized an audio-laboratory of his own in which he built montages of sounds- "documentary compositions and musico-literary word-montages."⁴⁾ He adopted the pseudonym Dziga Vertov - both names connoting *turning, revolving*. The names suggested "a spinning top and perhaps perpetual motion—the keynote of the following years and of his role in them"⁵⁾.

After the October Revolution in 1917, Vertov worked in the newsreel section of the Cinema Committee in Moscow. He established, directed and edited the weekly newsreel *Kino-Nedelia* (Cinema Weekly) and the periodical reportage *Kino-Pravda* (Cinema Truth).

The *Kino-Nedelia* and *Kino-Pravda* newsreel series were, respectively, Vertov's first work in film and his first attempt to go beyond the limitations of time when, as Vertov remembered it, "filming was being conducted under battle conditions on all fronts"⁶⁾. *Kino-Nedelia* consisted of forty-three issues released in 1918 and 1919. Twenty-three issues of *Kino-Pravda* were produced between 1922 and 1925.

Vertov's primary purpose of *Kino-Nedelia* was to emphasize the establishment of Bolshevik authority throughout the country. To achieve this purpose, *Kino-Nedelia* relied on conventional newsreel images whose power can only be appreciated if they are seen in the context of their times. Approximately one-third of the items in *Kino-Nedelia* deal with the theme of the establishment of the Soviet State⁷⁾.

Technically speaking, Vertov began to develop the first stage of montage in *Kino-Nedelia*. It was the formal cutting between images which was later to become his trademark. Although the pace of this cutting is ridiculously slow, it creates the sense of cinematically

augmented motion within the viewer. The production of the movement could not exist without cinema. In later manifestoes, Vertov was to refer to this aspect of his work as *Kino-Eye*, or *Cinema-Eye*:

... I am eye. I am a mechanical eye. I, a machine, am showing you a world, the likes of which only I can see. I free myself from today and forever from human immobility. I am in constant movement, I approach and draw away from objects, I crawl under them, I move alongside the mouth of a running horse, I cut into a crowd at full speed, I run in front of running soldiers, I turn on my back, I rise with an aeroplane, I fall and soar together with falling and rising bodies.

This is I, apparatus, manoeuvring in the chaos of movements, recording one movement after another in the most complex combinations...⁸⁾

While what was to become *Kino-Eye* is just barely apparent in *Kino-Nedelia*, the second of Vertov's major principles, *Life Caught Unawares*, played a prominent part in the newsreels. As it is defined in Seth Feldman's analysis on Vertov, *Life Caught Unawares* meant:

... the creation of a sense in the viewer that the activities of the subject on the screen had not been affected by the presence of the camera. The hidden camera, a favourite device of Vertov's cameraman brother Mikhail Kaufman, played a small role in creating these images. More after and more significantly, Vertov would depend on his subject being too busy to call attention to the camera's presence⁹⁾.

Before Vertov began to make *Kino-Pravda*, he headed a group of experimental documentarists who took the name *Kinoks*, or *Kino-Eyes*. Vertov brought with him the ability to liberate film from the conventions of the newsreel.

The techniques of formal montage which first appeared in *Kino-Nedelia* were developed to the utmost during the *Kino-Pravda* period. One typical example of the cross cutting was the opening sequence of *Kino-Glaz*, a feature made by the *Kinoks* in 1924. Vertov creates an explosion of many shots of dancing, drinking figures. A similar effect is created in the sequence of *Kino-Pravda*. Here, a continuous group of shots of faces, mouths and machinery is used to convey enthusiasm¹⁰⁾.

As in *Kino-Nedelia*, Vertov developed *Life Caught Unawares* in *Kino-Pravda* in order to indicate a type of documentary film that treated reality without any preconceived notions. A difference in emphasis between *Kino-Nedelia* and *Kino-Pravda*, however, can be found in some sequence of *Kino-Pravda*¹¹⁾. Vertov in the sequence has little use for *Life Caught Unawares*. The sequence looks posed.

But if Vertov seems to abandon *Life Caught Unawares* in *Kino-Pravda*, he might do with a zeal for creative freedom which characterises the new stage of his work. Trying to do everything cinema could do, Vertov inevitably jumped over the boundaries of *Life Caught Unawares*. He found that one of the most useful capabilities of cinema was that of reproducing a posed or acted event.

Consequently, *Kino-Pravda* came to exist as a purely experimental venture in the cinematic interpretation of events. *Kino-Eye* was capable of constructing and reconstructing images which the news produced.

Vertov's earliest works show the awareness of how to create films in response to social realities. *Kino-Nedelia* demonstrated how effective a newsreel could be as a tool for social change. *Kino-Pravda* expanded the scope of the newsreel to include analytic interpretations of nonimmediate subject matter. The first documentary film came into existence with the work of Dziga Vertov.

B. Renunciation of the Acted Film

Late in 1920 after Vertov finished his first newsreel work, *Kino-Nedelia* series, fiction films began reappearing in the war-scarred film theaters. Since there were not yet new Russian features, foreign films came out of hiding, or were newly imported.

The events of 1920-22 propelled Vertov into a wider range of roles: writer of polemic manifestoes, theorist, producer. Vertov denounced traditional fiction films and addressed new film artists as the Council of Three in his typical manifesto:

"Art" works of pre-revolutionary days surround you like icons and still command your prayerful emotions. Foreign lands abet you in your confusion, sending into new Russia the living corpses of movie dramas garbed in splendid technological dressing.

Spring is coming. At the studios new activity is awaited. The Council of Three notes with frank horror how producers leaf through works of literature looking for scenario material. Names of theater dramas and epics selected for studio enactment float through the air. In the Ukraine, and here in Moscow, several photoplays have already been made displaying every symptom of impotence.

The body of cinema is numbed by the terrible poison of habit. We demand an opportunity to experiment with this dying organism, to find an antidote. . .¹²⁾

Vertov was sure what the antidote must be. He saw the traditional fiction film as something in the same class as religion. He saw the literary scenario as relics of the past which had to be destroyed if the cinema was to fulfill its destiny. Therefore, to build cinema on theatrical tradition seemed to him outrageous foolishness. The task of new Soviet films, as

Vertov saw it, was to document socialist reality.

In 1922 after having formed the *Kinoks* group – no longer the Council of Three but a wider group – Vertov issued a series of manifestoes, *Kinoks-Revolution* that called for the renunciation of the theatrical film, actors, sets, studios, and scripts. In the series of *Kino-Pravda*, Vertov demonstrated this approach:

We are carrying the battle against art cinema, and it is hurled back at us a hundredfold. With the fragments left over by the art cinema—and often without means of any kind—we build our cine-objects.

Kino-Pravda has been kept out of the theatres, but the opinion of the public and of the independent press could not be disguised. *Kino-Pravda* has been greeted unequivocally as a turning-point in Russian cinema¹³.

Vertov rejected all theatricality and artificiality in favour of an uncompromised actuality. Again citing his manifesto from the different source, film should pass:

right over the heads of actors and over the roofs of the studios, directly into life and truth, multi-dramatic and muti-detective reality¹⁴.

Today it appears that Vertov's early manifestoes overstated the actual situation when they assumed that certain failures in the Soviet cinema of that time indicated a disease of the entire dramatic film. The fact was that the work he based upon the manifestoes not only materially assisted the eradication of pre-revolutionary technique from the Soviet cinema, but also acted as a conscience throughout succeeding film history¹⁵.

While most films produced at that time approached subject matter of the past with attitudes strongly influenced by the theatrical tradition, Vertov's films treated the present with an approach as revolutionary as the material he treated. Willingly or not, Vertov gave new strength to his enemy—the acted film.

C. Kino-Eye:

'Reflection of Reality' and 'The Organization of the Seen World'

'Reflection of reality' was a phrase inseparably linked with the theories and work of Vertov. His concern was to use the camera as his means of research on the 'reflection of reality' and, for this to be accomplished, he felt that the camera had to be unfettered from the limitation of the human eye. Vertov emphasized the superhuman versatility of the camera in a vigorous series of pronouncements and manifestoes, all proclaiming the unique

quality of Kino-Eye. He described this with a prophetic fervour:

Basic and essential: film-perception of the world.

The most fundamental point: use of the camera as a cinema-eye more perfect than the human eye for exploring the chaos of visual phenomena filling the universe.

The cinema-eye works and moves in time and in space, seeing and recording impressions in a way quite different from the human eye. Limitations imposed by the position of the body, or by how much we can see of any phenomenon in a second of seeing—such restrictions do not exist for the cinema-eye, which has much wider capabilities.

We cannot improve our eyes, but we can always improve the camera¹⁶⁾.

Along with the surreal capabilities of the camera, Vertov stressed the editor's role:

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 a truth¹⁷⁾.

Organizing frames thematically, Vertov used not the montage of feature films which meant only the putting together of separate shots according to the scenario, but the montage of 'the organization of the seen world' which meant thus:

1. Montage during the observation period (immediate orientation of the naked eye at all times and places).
2. Montage after observation (logical organization of vision into one or another definite direction).
3. Montage at the time of filming (orientation of the armed eye, . . . the appropriate camera-position, and adjustment to the several changing conditions of filming).
4. Montage after filming (rough organization of the filmed material according to main indications, . . .).
5. Judgment of the montage pieces (immediate orientation to link certain juxtaposition, . . .).
6. Final montage (exposition of larger themes through a series of smaller subtler themes, . . .)¹⁸⁾.

The montage of 'the organization of the seen world' was peculiarly associated with the Soviet cinema's need to reflect the external world with more reality than was usually attained by the montage of feature films. The new importance given to Kino-Eye in the theoretical and technical history of the world cinema was touched upon in a notable remark by Vertov in a 1929 lecture during a visit to Paris:

The history of Kino-Eye has been a relentless struggle to modify the course of world cinema, to place in cinema production a new emphasis of the "unplayed" film over the play-film, to substitute the document for *mise-en-scène*, to break out of the proscenium of the theatre and to enter the arena of life itself¹⁹⁾.

Reality was to be recorded by broadening the visual range of the human eye. Truth was to be achieved by a direct encounter with uncontrolled life. Then the camera could set out to discover the genuineness of a particular human scene. Vertov's arguments about the superiority of actuality were considered as model for all Soviet film production to follow and Kino-Eye became a prototype of modern *cinéma-vérité* methods.

D. Vertov and Other Soviet Documentarists

If 'the newsreel tradition,' principally led by the work of Vertov, was the first major step toward evolution of documentary as genre, 'the propagandist tradition' was another essential step in the evolution of the documentary form²⁰⁾. The purpose of propagandist films, as Vertov's, was to instruct the Russian people about the Revolution and to win them over to the Communist cause.

Propagandists started with almost no film tradition behind them and a shortage of film stock and film equipment, and were thus forced to find new ways to use to express their ideas, essentially in the area of editing-montage. Lev Kuleshov came to the conclusion that it was not the shot in itself which was important but the juxtaposition of two images that gives each individual shot its importance and emotional force. V.I. Pudovkin was concerned with the use of close-ups not for pointing up details but as an organic way to say something. And Sergei Eisenstein evolved a theory that he paralleled with Chinese hieroglyphics: the juxtaposition of two dissimilar images that took on a new meaning by their contrast with one another²¹⁾.

The theories were put to use in the creation of some of the most important and memorable works in the history of film. They were mainly reconstructions of real events using the actual locations in which these revolutionary events took place, and they often had an extraordinary feel of reality about them. More specifically, it is worth quoting Paul Rotha on Eisenstein's *Ten Days That Shook the World* (*October*), 1928.

It undertook the selection and presentation of actual events and persons, not for accurate historical description but for the expression of a definite viewpoint which conformed with a definite political regard for the affairs of 1917. . . This, you may say, is merely the result of propagandist aim. It is. But it is also something which gives new meaning to familiar things; not representing persons and things as they are, but relating them in such a manner to their surroundings that they temporarily are transformed by the powers of the film into material which can be shaped to take on different significances according to the director's aim; in this case to serve a political end by means of a dialectical treatment²²⁾.

Potemkin, 1925, Eisenstein's reconstruction of a mutiny in the time of the Czar, is one of the most famous of all films in the history of the cinema. Eisenstein himself said of *Potemkin* that while it functioned as drama, it "looks like a newsreel of an event."²³⁾ This quality led some to associate it with documentary. But what Eisenstein assembled with his montage was not fragments of actuality but fragments of his own intense vision.

While the masses are the hero in Eisenstein's films, the hero in Pudovkin's films is an individual who is idealized and presented as a personification of the masses. Among his most important films are: *Mother*, 1926, based on Gorky's novel of the same name and actual incidents; *The End of St. Petersburg*, 1927, based on the orthodox Communist view of the war and revolution, rather than on a strictly historical account; and *Storm over Asia*, 1928, about the early years of the Soviet and of foreign intervention and which has been widely praised for complex cutting and careful editorial construction²⁴⁾.

In the chaos of the first post-revolution years, the newsreel-documentarist had briefly won dominance. But much of what Vertov had reported was now being transmuted into legend. The means of transmutation was not newsreel or pure documentary, but fiction. Vertov had been part of a sequence of brilliant explosions that had made Soviet cinema, in the mid-1920's, a sudden world wonder. But the focus of interest had rapidly shifted from newsreel or pure documentary to the works of Eisenstein, Pudovkin and others. The full importance of Vertov's theories and ideas became apparent after his death in 1954.

NOTES

- 1) Grierson was the anonymous reviewer for The New York Sun of February 8, 1926, who wrote the article titled "Flaherty's Poetic *Moana*." Here for the first time he gave currency to the term "documentary" in English. John Grierson, "Flaherty's Poetic *Moana*" in *The Documentary Tradition*, ed. Lewis Jacobs (New York: Hopkinson and Blake, 1971), p. 25.
- 2) The account of Vertov's career is based largely on his autobiographical documents assembled by Val Thalberg in *Film Culture*, no. 25 (Spring 1962) and edited by Luda and Jean Schnitzer and Marcel Martin in *Cinema in Revolution* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1973). Other sources as noted. There is scant English material on Vertov.
- 3) Dziga Vertov, "How Did It Begin?" in *Cinema in Revolution*, p. 79.
- 4) *Ibid.*
- 5) Erik Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 52.
- 6) Vertov, "The Writings of Dziga Vertov," trans. Val Thalberg *Film Culture*, no. 25 (Spring 1962).
- 7) "Cinema Weekly and Cinema Truth" by Seth Feldman in *Sight and Sound* 43 (Winter 1973/74) is the main source of the section on *Kino-Nedelia* and *Kino-Pravda*.
- 8) Sitney, ed., *Film Culture Reader*, p. 362 quoted in Barnouw, *Documentary*, p. 58.

- 9) Feldman, "Cinema Weekly and Cinema Truth," p. 35.
- 10) Within this sequence, we are shown workers shutting down their machines to attend a ceremony honouring a newly born 'October baby.' The baby is passed among a small group of Party members, gifts are presented to the parents, and the singing of the Internationale begins. It is at this point that the machinery seems to set itself in motion and join in the singing, for the montage finale. See Feldman's article in *Sight and Sound*, p. 37.
- 11) According to Feldman's analysis, the sequence described above (Note 10) illustrates a difference in emphasis between *Kino-Nedelia* and *Kino-Pravda*.
- 12) Vertov, "The Council of Three" quoted in Barnouw, *Documentary*, p. 54.
- 13) Vertov, "Fragments From a Journal" in *Cinema in Revolution*, p. 83.
- 14) Vertov, "The Writings of Dziga Vertov."
- 15) For further discussion of Vertov's influence on succeeding film history, see Jay Leyda, *Kino: A History of the Russian and Soviet Film* (New York: Collier Books, 1973), pp. 179-80.
- 16) Sitney, ed., *Film Culture Reader*, p. 362 quoted in Barnouw, *Documentary*, p. 58.
- 17) *Ibid.*
- 18) Alexander Belenson, *Cinema Today* (Moscow 1925) quoted in Leyda, *Kino*, pp. 178-79.
- 19) Quoted in Leyda, *Kino*, p. 176.
- 20) For further details about this subject, see Paul Rotha, Sinclair Road, and Richard Griffith, *Documentary Film* (New York: Hastings House, 1970), pp. 88-96.
- 21) For an excellent discussion of this subject, see Karel Reisz and Gavin Millar, *The Technique of Film Editing* (New York: Hastings House, 1972), pp. 26-40.
- 22) Rotha and others, *Documentary Film*, pp. 93-94.
- 23) Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form*, trans., ed. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1944), p. 162.
- 24) For further discussion on Pudovkin's theory and his films, see V.I. Pudovkin, *Film Technique and Film Acting* (New York: Grove, 1970).