

3. *Cacophony of the Donbass*¹

The very first responses to *Enthusiasm*—the ones that made it into the transcriptions of the discussions following the Kiev and Moscow previews—have the advantage not only of freshness, but of representing a variety of viewpoints: cultural bureaucrats, journalists, book editors, film society members, engineers were all present, along with (in Moscow) the important documentarians Vladimir Erofeev and Esfir Shub. Mostly negative, these comments also gave Vertov the opportunity to offer what are probably his most spontaneous defenses of the film.

The majority of speakers found the film boring and/or unlistenable, technically poorly done, or conceptually and politically flawed—and often all of these at once. The comments made by comrade Iudin (from the State Anti-Religious Publishing House) during the Moscow session are representative of the harsher dismissals:

The combinations of sound and visual image are primitive. The sound is poorly edited: sections cancel one another out or jump out of the overall rhythm of the editing. Sound cinema has already advanced much further than this. *Enthusiasm* is yesterday's film. [I] call the documentary character of the sound into question. The first part of the film is absurd; the montage of the church with [alcoholics consuming] vodka is a dated, primitive agit-device.²

Predictably, Vertov found the comment about the dubious “documentary character of the sound” particularly objectionable, and took care in his reply bluntly to refute it. A contingent source of the sound problems may have been the quality of amplification in the theaters; Lev Roshal' surmises that the film's more positive reception in Germany was due to the superior sound reproduction technique in place there, adding that Vertov himself claimed to have “heard his film for the first time” in Germany.³ Whether or not this is the case, during the discussions Vertov never made any excuses for the sound, and those of his critics who disliked it certainly placed all the blame on the filmmaker.⁴

¹ The phrase, usually attributed to Vertov's nemesis Ippolit Sokolov, was probably first uttered at the Moscow preview (2 February 1931) by a bureaucrat named Rymalis (RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 417, l. 79). It was later reiterated *ad nauseum* in attacks on *Enthusiasm*.

² RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 417, l. 79.

³ Roshal', *Dziga Vertov*: 218.

⁴ Prior to any of the previews, however, Vertov expressed his concern about possible sound reproduction problems in a letter to Orelovich (undated, but written in the middle of the editing work on the film, sometime after 17 August and before the end of September 1930). He noted that the film would have to be screened “sooner or later,” but that the only sound projector in Ukraine outside of Kiev (in Kharkov) is in poor condition and “the best way to compromise the film in the eyes of the spectator.” If improvements aren't made, he added, the film will exist only for the RSFSR, and “Ukraine will receive cacophony” (RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 417, p. 47).

No doubt because of its novelty—and not necessarily because of the sound quality in the auditorium⁵—members of the Kiev audience (mostly administrators at the Kiev Film Factory) spent a lot of time talking about the sound, with the more hostile Moscow group dwelling upon the film’s political aspects. A particularly detailed comment on the sound came in Kiev from the VUFKU official Mar’ian who, while insisting that the film was “an event of great importance” that had to be “kept away from facile criticisms,” had to admit that

it is impossible to sit through the film, impossible to listen to it, and not just in the last section either, but much earlier on as well. [...] The film is extraordinarily overloaded with sounds of a monotonous character [...], extraordinarily overloaded with din, and it would seem that a human being is simply physiologically incapable of apprehending such a quantity of sounds—though again, I’m speaking only about my own impressions. [...] If comrade Vertov and his entire group, who worked on this film, do indeed perceive a difference among these sounds, for the spectator they all merge nonetheless into an unbroken roaring noise without proper nuance. Thus, they do not affect [the viewer] organically, but affect instead his nervous system. Listening to these terrible sounds, at moments one closes one’s eyes and feels like falling asleep.⁶

Once again, for Mar’ian the Vertovian sensorium is of such intensity, such volume (“such a quantity of sounds”) that in encountering it human perception is overburdened to the verge of growing numb (“falling asleep”). The accusation of “weight,” of “overload” (*peregruzhennost’*), is leveled over and over again in these transcripts. One speaker at the Moscow session asserted that the film would fail to get through to 80 percent of the audience due to its “formal overload” (while the other 20 percent would simply dislike it);⁷ in Kiev Vertov himself admitted that the film, though not at that point in its final cut, was “overload[ed] with material.”⁸ The criticism would linger on after the film was released: in a highly negative review entitled “Sound But No Picture,” Viktor Shklovsky finds Vertov guilty of “overloading” the viewer with both image and sound, going so far as to claim—in

⁵ I say this only because Egon Erwin Kisch, the famous globetrotting left-wing journalist, apparently saw the film in Kiev (perhaps at the first preview) in 1930, and called it “the most impressive artwork of 1930” (*Die Welt am Abend* 304:1 [31 March 1931]); RGALI f. 2091, op. 1, d. 96, l. 91.

⁶ RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 417, l. 53ob.

⁷ RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 417, l. 81.

⁸ RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 417, l. 60.

terms that should recall for us Bergson on perception—that audience members are “physically exterminated by Vertov while watching the film.”⁹

When the time came to generalize, some of the discussants resorted to the familiar categories of textbook aesthetics, like “lack of measure/moderation” [*mera*]: “good material is turned into its opposite by an absence of any sense of moderation.”¹⁰ In Kiev, Mar'ian deployed the tropes of a pedantic classicism:

In sound cinema, noise can have an effect for a certain number of minutes, but necessarily and only if surrounded by some sort of silence, some contrast—if it's offered up just like that, it ceases to work. [...] Emotionalism [*patetika*] must be conveyed not through unceasing noises but in various combinations, for here the law that operates in all branches of art—the sense of moderation—remains in force.¹¹

But more often the criticisms took on a sharply social/political character, especially when speakers floated the implication that Vertov's indifference to his audience was at root indifference to the common working man. In this way, the insistence on “moderation” could be specified as a matter of respecting the perceptual limits of workers' bodies, as in this comment by a certain comrade Solov'iev in Kiev:

I will never be bold enough to tell people, “go and watch and listen to *Enthusiasm*.” Take our working man: after a whole day of heavy work—and not in the environment of a film factory, but in an environment [filled with] those disorganized noises that we just heard—two hours of the kind of physiological burden [*nagruzka*] that we get in the ears [from this film] are unbearable.

This is bad, he added, “[especially] inasmuch as we want the film to work; that is, to summon and to teach, and not simply be watched.”¹² A Moscow speaker was more blunt: whatever spectator Vertov had in mind, it wasn't a working spectator, who has “no need for this naked aestheticism, profusely heaped up.”¹³ These statements were not being made in a vacuum, for (as is well known) intolerance of avant-garde obscurities had waxed in the press ever since the attacks on Eisenstein's *October* (1927); following the ascension of Boris Shumyatsky to the chair of Soiuzkino in December 1930, a growing stress on intelligibility and conventional plotting would radically constrict the montage experimentation of the

⁹ “Est' zvuki—Net lenty,” *Govorit Moskva*, 20 May 1931; quoted in Roshal', *Dziga Vertov*: 216. In 1976 Shklovsky wrote that he saw *Enthusiasm* again in the West a few years later, apparently under better technical conditions, and changed his view of the film (“O Dzige Vertove,” *Za 60 let*: 89).

¹⁰ Spoken by Dorfman of the Kino Publishing House in Moscow; RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 417, l. 81.

¹¹ RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 417, ll. 53ob, 54.

¹² RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 417, l. 55ob.

1920s.¹⁴ Thus, by 1931, a film like *Enthusiasm* that (supposedly) respects neither the limits nor the desires of working audiences was indeed “way out of date.”

Vertov, as we will see, had his own answer to these criticisms of his film’s aural textures, its “inhuman noises.”¹⁵ It is interesting to note, in the meantime, that *Enthusiasm*’s more properly *conceptual* structure was criticized largely not because of any “immoderate” or “unbearable” attributes, but rather because it was too lacking in conflict, indeed too *utopian*. The reproach was not a new one; *One Sixth of the World* had also been attacked for holding up a vision of perfected socialism, rather than narrating the struggle *for* socialism:

The people who are struggling [...], who are building the New, the people who are building socialism, are not shown us by Vertov. Vertov *himself* builds socialism. As a matter of fact, Vertov doesn’t even build it; he shows everything as existing already in fully constructed form. It’s not shown how it was built, or is being built now—there’s nothing about the *process of construction* [emphasis in the original].¹⁶

That Vertov in *One Sixth* ignores “processes of construction” is more than debatable, but we should not allow the critic’s hyperbole to obscure the main point. Vertov, it is claimed, is more interested in showing *structure* and harmony within that structure than in telling stories about heroic protagonists fighting against and defeating wicked enemies. And it is indeed true that the foes opposing Vertov’s proletariat in virtually all the major films tend to be almost elemental in character, rather than some personified “class enemy”: the heavy ruins of war, physical and cultural inertia, Chaos and Necessity as such. Vertov sketches out the *relationships* that enable these antagonists to be conquered, and the result is an essentially non-narrative (if extravagantly dynamic) representation of structure, a *utopian machine* if you will.¹⁷

It was precisely this perceived absence of narratable conflict against which several in the Moscow audience railed. To some, it seemed that conflict had been drained altogether out of the film; “the director’s mistake,” said one Moscow audience member,

consists in the fact that the masses are shown as celebrating rather than working. In this film, thousands shout “hurrah,” while only a handful

¹³ RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 417, l. 81.

¹⁴ See Richard Taylor, “Ideology as Mass Entertainment: Boris Shumyatsky and Soviet Cinema in the 1930s,” *Inside the Film Factory*: 192-216.

¹⁵ Description offered by comrade Voronets’kii in Kiev: RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 417, l. 54.

¹⁶ Detsenko, “Dziga Vertov ‘Stroit sotsializm’: O Kino-fil’m *Shestaia chast’ mira*,” *Komsomol’skaia Pravda* 5 January 1927: 7.

¹⁷ For a discussion of the tendency within the classic utopias away from narrative, see Jameson, *The Seeds of Time*: 56-57.

work. This is the reason the film leaves such a “non-Party” impression.¹⁸

Particularly intolerable, it seems, was the opening “anti-religious” sequence that, though apparently quite unobjectionably atheistic, failed to expose religious believers as active antagonists of socialism. The “allegedly anti-religious bits” had to be excised, continued the same commentator (one Alekseev of the cultural division of the Moscow Regional Council of Unions), because “documentary footage of old women devoutly praying in no way constitutes anti-religious propaganda.”¹⁹ Usorov of the Commissariat of Enlightenment more pointedly identified the “falsity” of the anti-religious section in Vertov’s total failure to show that “religion actively and effectively [*deistvenno*] impedes us from building socialism—in this lies its main danger.”²⁰ Another particularly hostile spectator agreed that religion’s hindering of “socialist construction” was nowhere demonstrated in *Enthusiasm*, with the result that “the film as a whole is made as though class struggle does not exist at all in our country.”²¹ As a consequence of this absence of a narrative clash of clearly demarcated opposing forces, *Enthusiasm*, despite its “formal mastery,” lacks “orientation toward a conclusion,” and amounts to a “sound-newsreel montage, nothing more.”²²

These accusations of “lack of struggle” are grounded, in fact, in recognizable features of the film. Certainly, the rhetoric about “sabotage” by “wreckers and kulaks,” so droningly ubiquitous in the press at this time (and which helped to shape the narratives of later films like Medvedkin’s *Happiness* [1932] and Eisenstein’s lost *Bezhin Meadow* [1937]) is essentially absent from *Enthusiasm*. One can only agree with those of Vertov’s critics who maintained that the film does *not* show religion “actively and effectively” opposing socialism.²³ Instead, Vertov spends his time on a celebratory representation of the state’s takeover of the churches and their conversion into “worker’s clubs”;²⁴ in terms of the film’s

¹⁸ RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 417, l. 82.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 417, l. 81.

²¹ RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 417, l. 80. The speaker was the journalist Ianov from the paper “School Brigade.”

²² RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 417, l. 80, 82.

²³ Cf. Karl Radek’s remark (in a review of *Enthusiasm* in *Mir* [5 December 1931]) to the effect that the anti-religious activities are presented “as a naked fact, isolated,” “in no way linked to [the workers’] struggle for socialism” (quoted in François Champarnaud, *Revolution et contre-revolution culturelles en URSS: De Lenine a Jdanov* (Paris: Éditions Anthropos, 1975): 253).

²⁴ The scenes in *Enthusiasm* of steeples being torn down and of religious paintings and relics being carried out of churches are quite authentic, and the group spent a considerable amount of time in fall 1929 filming anti-religious activities of this kind. Svilova’s diary gives an hour-by-hour account of this shooting: thus, on 21 October (from noon to 3) in Enakievo they filmed the removal of icons; the full conversion of a church in Artemovsk into a club was filmed on 31 October; and finally the “removal of church items” and “reactions of the crowd” were shot in Lisichansk on 9 November. The material that, according to Svilova’s descriptions,

larger structure, as we will see, the anti-religious overture (the “Last Sunday”) is concerned to show religion, along with alcohol and tsarism, as already-surpassed historical residues rather than as living and vital antagonists. Vertov’s earliest plans for the film imply a slightly more “dualistic” moral scheme, and suggest that he had intended *Enthusiasm* to involve more episodes of contrast between “moments of old and new modes of living”: comparing the “primitive” Shevchenko salt mine with the “modern” Liebknecht salt mine, and so on.²⁵ After the overcoming of religion and alcohol in the second reel, however, these contrasts, with the praise and blame they imply, largely disappear from the film in its final form. François Champarnaud’s observation is acute: *Enthusiasm* is neither a documentary nor a narrative but a “poster in sound (*affiche sonore*).”²⁶

At the same time, there is something about the accusation of “conflictless-ness” that is difficult to reconcile with the high aural tension of the *Enthusiasm* soundtrack, and the film’s sensory excess in general; indeed, it seems counterintuitive on the face of it to characterize the world of *Enthusiasm* as especially harmonious or “utopian” at all. In a superb recent essay, Laurent Jullier notes how the relatively joyless sequences of work and exercise—particularly when compared with similar material in *Man with the Movie Camera*—can scarcely fail to connote “images of prison, of the concentration-camp universe” for a spectator of our day.²⁷ In fact, some in the film’s first audiences already sensed these very connotations, as the following comments by Mar’ian in Kiev make clear:

The Donbass mustn’t be represented in this way, because at times the montage with all its noise generates the impression not of the emotionality of the work of the Five-Year Plan, but rather—if you’ll permit me to say this—of “hard” [i.e., prison-camp] labor [*katorzhnykh rabot*]. In such amounts, in such doses—this is hell. This [representation] is incorrect in general, in my view, inasmuch as the emotionality of machinery and industrialization must not be conveyed today through din and noise, for all that is but a remnant of the past; everything new in the realm of mechanization is, as far as possible, quieter.²⁸

most resembles that in *Enthusiasm* (including shots of angels and crosses “being cast down from the gates,” “hanging the red flag instead of a cross,” and the grotesque effigy of a anathematizing priest) seems to have been taken in Artemovsk on 30/31 of October, suggesting this site as the origin for much of this material in the first two reels. See RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 414, ll. 7-24ob.

²⁵ From Vertov’s first shooting plan for *Enthusiasm* (dated 11 September 1929): RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 415, ll. 12, 14.

²⁶ Champarnaud, *Revolution et contre-revolution culturelles*: 252.

²⁷ Jullier, “Travail de l’ouvrier, travail du cinéaste” in *Vertov: L’Invention du réel*: 105.

²⁸ RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 417, l. 54.

Sitting in the Kiev audience, however, was engineer Olotnin, who responded to Mar'ian's point in terms that must have pleased Vertov immensely:

To me as an engineer, the film was entirely comprehensible; for me, both the noise (which seems disorganized and incomprehensible to many) and the crashing are acceptable. This noise and crashing is not a remnant of the past; as far as the organization of mining operations is concerned, those [sounds] will exist to a considerable extent in the future as well.²⁹

Olotnin's remarks (to which we shall return later) suggest that Mar'ian's insistence on the "dated" quality of Vertov's noises conceals a desire for their radical suppression, at least when presented in public and on screen. For Mar'ian, we might surmise, the kind of "emotionality" (*pafo*s) required by the Plan would of necessity be purged of the sooty, noisy reality of workers' lives, and instead sublimated to the domesticating tropes of conventional panegyric. Clearly enough, Vertov refuses to build his own "industrial symphony" around the banal "classical" literary tropes of the official paeans to Soviet modernization (factory "epics," hymns to hydroelectric dams) then beginning to appear. In a fierce letter written in December 1930 petitioning for the public release of *Enthusiasm*, Vertov showed his proud awareness of his film's distinctiveness amid the slough of Plan celebrations:

I refuse to become like those novelists and semi-novelists who hymn the Donbass while turning away from it, shutting their delicate noses, their delicate eyes and ears. I live the sounds of the Donbass and wrote the film with the voices of machines, the voices of shock-workers, and the sounds of radio-telegraph messages. Let the novelistic lapdogs and lapdogish critics run away in horror.³⁰

And run away they did, as we have seen. The film lacked clearly personified villains; even worse, it gave short shrift to what should have been the hero (the Party); it told no coherent story. At the same time, the film quivered with overwhelming noise, a noise so shocking that it could not be incorporated into any narrative of improvement and modernization. *Enthusiasm* was torn, that is, between the fragmentation of "photomontage" and the blunt, inassimilable "din" of immediate sound-documents—*déjà vu* all over again! How might Vertov—with Olotnin's help—respond to this dual charge?

²⁹ RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 417, l. 54.

³⁰ RGALI f. 2091, op. 2., d. 417, l. 74ob.