

1. *A Superhuman Eye*

Georg Lukács never wrote anything about Dziga Vertov's work, and perhaps never saw any of it. All the same, his forceful theoretical defense of realism and opposition to both modernist and documentary aesthetics make him a surprisingly useful "virtual center" around which our account of the larger debate can be built.¹ Thus, I begin by wondering what he *might* have written about Vertov's work, had he incorporated a discussion of it into, say, his great 1938 essay on realism and modernism, "Realism in the Balance." The verdict would doubtless have been negative, although perhaps not without interesting ambiguities.

Though Vertov is plainly no "realist" by Lukácsian standards, his concern with making the long-term historical process and the social-economic totality both comprehensible and concrete, and more generally his conception of art as a tool of worldly knowledge, might have met with Lukács's qualified approval. Is it perverse to hear in Vertov's call for a "communist decoding of world relations," in his desire "to find the resultant force amongst the million phenomena related to the given theme [...]; to wrest, through the camera, whatever is most typical, most useful, from life,"² something that resonates with the Hungarian critic's best known precepts?

[In the realist work] the surface of life is sufficiently transparent to allow the underlying essence to shine through (something which is not true of immediate experience in real life), [but] nevertheless manifests itself as immediacy, as life as it actually appears. Moreover, in [such works] we observe the whole surface of life in all its essential determinants, and not just a subjectively perceived moment isolated from the totality in an abstract and over-intense manner.³

We might think of the sequence in the fifth reel of *One Sixth of the World* (1926), when the dizzying proliferation of living detail, deriving from everywhere between "bourgeois" Europe and the Samoyed fur trade and far beyond, suddenly finds a comprehensive linkage at the

¹ Although the issue of "documentary aesthetics" within left cultural practice globally is far too large to discuss here, it should be noted parenthetically that the question of the relationship of documentary to both modernism and "social realism" was a vital one from the 1920s through the late 1940s (and again in the 1960s), particularly within the various "Popular Fronts," with the Lukács position playing an especially important role. For the American part of the story, see Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London and NY: Verso, 1997): 118-123.

² The first citation is from "Kino-Eye" (1926), *Kino-Eye*: 66; the second from "From Kino-Eye to Radio-Eye" (1929): 88.

³ Georg Lukács, "Realism in the Balance," trans. Rodney Livingstone, in *Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. Ronald Taylor, afterword Fredric Jameson (London and NY: Verso, 1997): 39.

Leipzig Fair as “pelts [...] are exchanged for machines for the Soviet nation”;⁴ or, on a different level and far more radically, the way that the self-reflexive procedures of *Man with the Movie Camera* saturate our very apprehension of the “documentary” image with the mediated knowledge of the image’s history. While images in that film remain documents of “real life,” we learn, as Jonathan Beller writes, “that *the image is constituted like an object*—it is assembled piece by piece like a commodity moving through the intervals of production—and it is a (technological and economic) development of the relations of production” (emphasis in the original).⁵ Kino-eye as critique of reification!

Of course, it will rightly be replied that this isn’t what Lukács, champion of Mann and Balzac, meant by “authentic realism” at all. The critic’s demand for the absorption of both life-details and “essential determinants” into (fictional) narrative portrayals would find little satisfaction in Vertov’s twin reliance upon registered “fact” (the *naïve* immediacy of documentary) and montage (the stringing-together of captivating fragments): the *formal* immediacy, that is, of what Eisenstein called “unmotivated camera mischief.”⁶ Not by accident does Lukács write explicitly and reproachfully in the same essay of James Joyce offering his readers a “direct photographic record of [...] ideas and scraps of experience [...] and] using them to construct a montage”:⁷

[I]mmediacy and abstraction are closely akin, and, more particularly, that thought which begins in immediacy can only lead to abstraction. [...] When the surface of life is only experienced immediately [as in Expressionism], it remains opaque, fragmentary, chaotic and uncomprehended. Since the objective mediations are more or less consciously ignored or passed over, what lies on the surface is frozen and any attempt to see it from a higher intellectual vantage-point has to be abandoned. [...] [A]s soon as [photomontage] claims to give shape to reality [...], to a world of relationships [...], or of totality [...], then the final effect must be one of profound monotony [proceeding] inexorably from the decision to abandon any attempt to mirror objective reality, to give up the artistic struggle to shape the highly complex mediations in all their unity and diversity and to synthesize them as characters in a work of literature.⁸

⁴ Intertitle as quoted in Seth R. Feldman, *Dziga Vertov: A Guide to References and Resources* (Boston: G.K. Hall and Co., 1979): 94.

⁵ Jonathan L. Beller, “Dziga Vertov and the Film of Money,” *boundary 2* 26.9 (1999): 162.

⁶ In “Beyond the Shot” (1929); quoted here from Vlada Petric, *Constructivism in Film: The Man with the Movie Camera—A Cinematic Analysis* (Cambridge and London: Cambridge UP, 1987): 56.

⁷ “Realism in the Balance”: 35.

⁸ “Realism in the Balance”: 38, 39, 43.

From this standpoint, no amount of skilful editing, no careful composition and placing of intertitles could overcome the frozen immediacy of the discrete film-facts that are Vertov's basic material. Even the self-reflexive "revelations" of *Man with the Movie Camera* are but different kinds of documentary fragments, whose value as "knowledge" is felt solely within the sphere of cinema as such. A larger, totalizing "vantage-point" can only be pasted on to the Vertovian documentary, as it were, rather than "authentically" and fully fashioned out of that arduous dialectic of lived experience and social reflection that leaves no moment unsynthesized. Thus, reading these words of Lukács, Vertov might take away the following reproach: raw, immediate filmic registrations of "life" are essentially so many flashes of mindless chaos; whatever larger meaning they have as an ensemble is the result of arbitrary *post facto* imposition, and will be felt as such.

As it turns out, our hypothetical Vertov-Lukács confrontation is not as gratuitous as it might seem, for Vertov was subjected to a similar critique in Soviet journals in the 1920s by writers critical of his fiercely defended methods. Viktor Shklovsky, whose mixed attitude toward Vertov grew more positive in later years, wrote in 1926 (in response to that year's *Stride, Soviet!*) that Vertov's cinema was

not achieving a new level of artistic expression, but merely narrowing the old one. In the films made by the *kinoks*, photographed events are impoverished because they lack an artistic bias in their relation to their objects.⁹

Instead of advocating an abandonment of documentary, however, Shklovsky suggested that Vertov return to the older newsreel practice of specific dating, insisting that the whole value of documentary images lies in knowing the "date, time and place" of their registration.¹⁰ The "higher vantage-point" required by Vertov is not, for Shklovsky, that of the synthesizing artist, but closer to that of the journalist or archivist.

A far more violent judgment (pronounced the following year in an anonymous article in *Kino Front*) distinguished the merely "biological" relation of Vertov's kinoks to material reality from the "social" and "truly artistic" approach taken by directors of "played film." Those directors, the writer argues, move "through and against" chaotic existing life "toward its maximal organization," as opposed to those, like the *kinoks*, who

purely, simply and reductively [repeat] in regard to cinema the worn-out slogan[s] "down with the easelists" (in painting), "facts instead of

⁹ Quoted in Petric, *Constructivism in Film*: 52.

¹⁰ Viktor Shklovskii, "Kuda shagaet Dziga Vertov?" in *Za 60 let: Raboty o kino*, ed. E. Levin and L. Kalagatina (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1985): 79.

anecdotes” (in literature); slogans that in essence are nothing but the obverse side of abstractionism [*bespredmetnichestvo*], of non-representationalism [*bessiuzhetnichestvo*]; the throw-away slogans [...] of emotional impotents who, as a consequence of the hypertrophy of culture [...] have been pulled away from social-cultural-artistic reflection toward biological primitivism [...] ¹¹

At root, these critiques of “*kinochestvo*” (again, hypothetical in Lukács’s case) characterize the Vertovian mode as trapped in an oscillation between mindlessness and intellectual schematism.¹² The use of “mere” documentary registrations deprives the photomontage artist’s work of any “higher intellectual vantage-point,” of “artistic bias,” of “organization,” of “social-cultural-artistic reflection.” On the other hand, whatever knowledge-effects the kino-eye might have to offer are but facile, technologically synthesized surrogates for that wider totalizing perspective that can be won only through “artistic struggle.”

Needless to say, it would be difficult to imagine a depiction of Vertov’s work more at odds with the view that has emerged as dominant, in various forms, over the last 30 years or so. That view finds the kino-eye casting a specifically *theoretical* gaze of exceptional depth and breadth upon not only lived reality but the workings of consciousness as such. In what is probably the inaugural formulation of this position, Annette Michelson links the Vertov of *Man with the Movie Camera* to Marx and Joyce as “positing a shift from the articulation of a comprehensive and dialectical view of the world to the exploration of the terrain of consciousness itself.”¹³ This exploration—involving a brilliant mobilization of all of film’s rhetorical and technical resources—aims at no mere representation or simulation but at a “*transformation* of consciousness in the most complete and intimate sense [my italics].”¹⁴ This remaking of the very structure of the spectator’s “vantage-point” seems considerably more radical than any effects sought by Lukács (who asks only that the realist artist “*show*

¹¹ “Polemika: Khivrin Promenad,” *Kino Front* 2 (1927). The article is actually devoted to an attack on the critic A. Blium (who defended Vertov): RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 942, l. 20. On the attack on easel painting by the “Productivists,” see Boris Arvatov, *Iskusstvo i klassy* (Moscow and Petrograd: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel’stvo, 1923); and Maria Gough, “Tarabukin, Spengler, and the Art of Production,” *October* 93 (Summer 2000): 79-108.

¹² The perceptive Aleksandr Kurs, in another discussion of *One Sixth* that attempts to understand that film’s difficulty, identified this oscillation quite precisely in the opposition between Vertov’s documentary “shots” and the cognitively-oriented argumentation of the intertitles: “[Vertov’s intertitles] are made out of bare political material and reworked didactically. As a result, the film as a whole requires those who watch it to carry out an impossible double labor: the shots are directed toward the emotional sphere, the intertitles toward the logical and cognitive. This leads to a superfluous waste of energy and fragmentation of attention. The spectator is not able to apprehend at once two [different] represented situations, and a citation from a political speech between them” (in *Samoe mogushchestvennoe* (Moscow: Kinopechat’, 1927): 53).

¹³ Annette Michelson, “*The Man with the Movie Camera*: From Magician to Epistemologist,” *Artforum* 10:7 (March 1972): 60-72; here p. 64.

what area of society [specific experiences and emotions] arise from and where they are going to,” as part of “the total life context [my italics]”),¹⁵ although it similarly involves a kind of truth-telling: in Michelson’s account, the truth about the illusionistic character of the cinematic image.

The real contrast between the two theorists emerges, as might be expected, in a different evaluation of cinematic technology. For the anti-photographic Lukács, a realist “grasp of the nature of society” is achievable only through the “hard work” of “scrutinizing all subjective experiences and measuring them against social reality”¹⁶; in contrast, Michelson argues that, for Vertov, filmmaking as *such* promises a new *access* to truth:

[T]he certainty of accession to that “world of naked truth“ [is] grounded in the acceptance, the affirmation of, the radically synthetic quality of film-making in the stylistics of montage.¹⁷

There is a subtle ambiguity in the phrasing here that allows us (quite properly) to identify both the labor of the film *maker* and the “radically synthetic quality” of film *technology* and *technique* as the means by which truth is accessed by Vertovian cinema. Certainly, however, it is the second, technological set of powers that have been stressed in most recent theoretical treatments—so much so that the “vantage-point” achieved by Vertov has at times come to appear an exclusively technological or non-human one.

In an argument openly indebted to Michelson’s pioneering article, Gilles Deleuze claims that Vertov’s “camera-eye,” at once steadfastly trained upon quotidian “unplayed” reality and extravagantly mobile, functions not as a surrogate “subjective” gaze of any kind but rather as something like the ongoing movement of the dialectic itself, an image of the concrete totality, wherein the endless fullness of the external universe is perpetually reconciled with never-static cognition. Needless to say, neither this fullness nor this kind of cognition can ever provide the form or content for any finite *human* perception; on the most visible level,

the Vertovian theory of the interval [marks] a correlation of two images which are distant (and incommensurable from the viewpoint of our human perception). [...] [T]he cinema could not run in this way

¹⁴ Michelson, “From Magician to Epistemologist”: 64.

¹⁵ Lukács, “Realism in the Balance”: 36.

¹⁶ Lukács, “Realism in the Balance”: 36, 37.

¹⁷ Michelson, “From Magician to Epistemologist”: 64.

from one end of the universe to the other without having at its disposal an agent which was capable of making all the parts converge.¹⁸

Most important [for Vertov] were all the (communist) transitions from an order [that] is being undone to an order [that] is being constructed. But between two systems or two orders, between two movements, there is necessarily the variable interval. In Vertov the interval of movement is perception, the glance, the eye. But the eye is not the too-immobile human eye; it is the eye of the camera, that is, an eye in matter, a perception such as it is in matter [...] The correlation between a non-human matter and a superhuman eye is the dialectic itself, because it is also the identity of a community of matter and a communism of man.¹⁹

It would seem initially, as François Zourabichvili argues in his excellent recent discussion of Deleuze-on-Vertov, that Deleuze's "agent of convergence" is not camera technology as such but the cumulative effect of an entire repertoire of montage techniques, from shooting and editing right down to the stringing-together of photograms along the film strip itself. It is the work of the editor-creator that allows *One Sixth of the World*, as Deleuze writes, to show "the interaction at a distance, within the USSR, between the most varied peoples, herds of animals, industries, cultures, exchanges of all kinds in the process of conquering time."²⁰

Zourabichvili points out, however, that Vertov's "convergence of parts" does not converge, in Deleuze's interpretation, around anything like a "subjective" center—however virtual or constructed—or emanate from a single authorial point. From a technical standpoint, argues Zourabichvili, it is Vertov's consistent use of false continuity sequences—ubiquitous from the *Kino-Pravdas* on—that "de-center" the images he offers:

[T]he image is decentered, subtracted from its subjective condition, since the eye is taken away from the voyeur or the camera operator without for all that being attributed to another operator, the spectator perceiving the falseness of the continuity. For false continuity has an objective effect: that of opening the image onto a point of view that is not its own, and insofar as it is not its own. Each image thus interacts with other images, instead of organizing itself according to the conditions of the centering of "natural"—that is, subjective—perception. And it is in this sense that Vertov rejoins [...] the material world of movement-images: he starts with necessarily centered images

¹⁸ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema I: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986): 82.

¹⁹ *Cinema I*: 39-40.

²⁰ *Cinema I*: 39.

(pointing the camera), which he submits to an operation of decentering (montage).²¹

False continuity, in other words, is one of the Deleuzian “powers of the false.” And yet, Zourabichvili’s reading exposes a subtle tension between a “necessary centering” and those “operations of decentering” that allow us more keenly to articulate the paradoxes of “vantage-point” within kino-eye practice. First, the initial act of shooting certainly involves specific *perspective*, even in Zourabichvili’s account; claims for the ability of the camera *as such* to liberate vision from circumscribed “subjective” contingencies are discounted, much as they were by those among Vertov’s contemporaries (like the witty Aleksandr Kurs) who discerned in kino-eye precepts an over-hasty ascription of utopian emancipatory power to the camera:

[The slogan] “Life as it is” (Vertov) [expresses] the excessive longing to leap ahead to a time when work, art, and science will fuse into a single, united human activity. Until that time, as long as life itself has not become art and science, art will remain an activity filling up the gaps within “life.” Even Vertov’s art, however much it might disclaim the illusionistic cinema. [...] [For] in no way does Vertov show life as it is, but rather life as it is caught at a certain point by a fixed camera pointed in a certain way.²²

Yet surely the same criticism could be leveled against both Zourabichvili and (in this redaction) Deleuze as regards their attitude toward *montage*. The great sequence of frozen motion in *Man with the Movie Camera*—where we move from “image” to “a series of photogrammes” and back again²³—is crucial for both theorists; yet neither mentions the key mediating onscreen presence of *montazhnitsa* Elizaveta Svilova, scissors in hand, classifying and organizing footage “in a certain [i.e., not decentered] way.” The obvious reminder here of “reflective vantage-point” might even be expected to please a Lukács, if only the “materials” of the artwork were not inertly mechanical, dialectically indigestible registrations.

On the other hand, that Vertov’s cinema remains a human artifact—persisting as a specific projection from a necessarily limited standpoint—casts doubt on its ability to *transform* “consciousness in the most complete and intimate sense.” Can particular consciousness pull itself (and others) into the New by its own (old) bootstraps? A venerable

²¹ François Zourabichvili, “The Eye of Montage: Dziga Vertov and Bergsonian Materialism,” trans. Melissa McMahon, in Gregory Flaxman, ed., *The Brain is the Screen: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Cinema* (Minneapolis and London: U of Minnesota P, 2000): 141-149; here p. 147.

²² A. Kurs, *Samoe mogushchestvennoe*: 48.

snare lurking to entrap utopian aspirations snaps shut once more, if only because (as Fredric Jameson puts it),

the ideals of Utopian living involve the imagination in a contradictory project, since [...] if you know already what your longed-for exercise in a not-yet-existent freedom looks like, then the suspicion arises that it may not really express freedom after all but only repetition.²⁴

Meanwhile, to accept (at least hypothetically) the view that the Vertovian kino-eye is a “super-” or “nonhuman eye” (Zourabichvili) generates its own distinct set of problems and antinomies—quite apart, that is, from any reminders (most famously offered by Rudolf Arnheim) that it is possible to regard cinema, and especially the silent, color-less cinema, as a reduced rather than more capacious sort of “perception.”²⁵

Certainly, Vertov’s own writings offer considerable support for the “superhuman” thesis. In “Kinoks: A Revolution” (1923), he writes that “the kino-eye [...] gathers and records impressions in a manner wholly different from that of the human eye”; “the mechanical eye, the camera,” he continues, “[rejects] the human eye as crib sheet,” and like a scientist “[schematizes] processes of long duration inaccessible to the normal eye.”²⁶ The same idea can be quite consistently traced over the years: the 1934 article on “*Three Songs of Lenin and Kino-Eye*” asserts that

[t]he idea that truth is only what is seen by the human eye is refuted both by microscopic research and all the data supplied by the technologically aided eye in general. It is refuted by the *very nature of man’s thought* [Vertov’s italics].²⁷

This suggests, not the absence of a link between kino-eye and human preceptor, but rather that this link (as Michelson stresses) is to be found on the level of homologies with human *cognition* and the mind’s aspirations. Everyday seeing and hearing, however, are vastly more limited than kino-eye in what they can absorb and make “converge.”

Thus, it is hardly necessary to rely on the Deleuzian framework, with its avowed focus on discovering some space of “acentred purity,”²⁸ to find something essentially super-

²³ *Cinema I*: 82.

²⁴ Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (NY: Columbia UP, 1994): 56-57.

²⁵ Cf. Laurent Jullier’s distinction between “subtractive” (e.g., Arnheimian) and “additive” (Vertovian) conceptions of cinematic registration in “*Enthousiasme!* Travail de l’ouvrier, travail du cinéaste” in *Vertov : L’Invention du réel*: 103-104; and in his *Les Sons au cinéma et à la télévision/Précis d’analyse de la bande-son* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1995).

²⁶ Vertov, “Kinoks: A Revolution” in *Kino-Eye*: 18-19.

²⁷ Vertov, “*Three Songs of Lenin and Kino-Eye*” in *Kino-Eye*: 125.

²⁸ *Cinema I*: 66.

human in Vertovian vision, inasmuch as the filmmaker's scientific aspirations carry much the same implication. In her landmark essay on *Enthusiasm*, Lucy Fischer, stressing that conception of cinema as scientific understanding, draws the inevitable conclusion for Vertov's theory of perception:

Vertov regards the process of film-making as a scientific endeavor. His task is "to combine science with cinematic depiction in the struggle to reveal truth ... to decipher reality." This is important because just as the scientist's depiction of the world has nothing to do with the average man's perception of the world (e.g., I see the sun "rise" and "set" and do not see the turning of the earth on its axis), so Vertov's depiction of the world in cinematic terms, through documentary, will be far from isomorphic with our perception of it. His model is life as it exists independent of the human preceptor, not life as experienced by Man.²⁹

Yet if the first phase of the dialectic was stymied by the limitations of the *producing agent*—whether that agent is taken to be the (mindless) camera or the subjectively/historically situated filmmaker—we shall see that the second is haunted by the hoary old problem of the *spectator* and his/her perceptual limits. For how, after all, is this non-human perception to be apprehended by human observers?

Doubtless the Enlightenment faith in the malleability/educability of the human mind, its ability to grow into the machine and vice-versa, would be part of the response here.³⁰ The *significance* of "film-truth" can emerge only gradually, with the training of the human eye. Vertov himself at times describes his cinema as a strict pedagogue or trainer of the senses, in vocabulary that would not have been out of place in Pudovkin's essays on film practice:

I make the viewer see in the manner best suited to my presentation of this or that visual phenomenon. The eye submits to the will of the camera and is directed by it to those successive points of the action that, most succinctly and vividly, bring the film phrase to the height or depth of resolution.³¹

We will need to return, on rather different terms, to the theme of cinema's "perceptual-pedagogical" function, an idea that involves a preliminary limiting of the independence of both spectator and (especially) camera from one another. If, however, we pursue to the end the more radical theses celebrating the camera's independence, and accept Vertovian

²⁹ Lucy Fischer, "Enthusiasm: From Kino-Eye to Radio-Eye," *Film Quarterly* 31.2 (Winter 1977-78): 25-36; here p. 28.

³⁰ For a subtle reflection on this aspiration toward a "paradoxical synthesis [...] of natural mechanism and human autonomy," see Malcolm Turvey, "Can the Camera See? Mimesis in *Man with a Movie Camera*," *October* 89 (Summer 1999): 25-50; here p. 48.

montage as (in Deleuze's words) a truly superhuman "agent [...] capable of making all the parts [in the universe] converge," we will be enabled at once provisionally to round off this theoretical debate and to link it to important aspects of the reception Vertov's films actually received.

In the first place, the very notion of an "agent of convergence" prompts us briefly to return to Henri Bergson's notions of perception as expressed in *Matter and Memory* (1896), famously the main philosophical source (alongside the work of C.S. Peirce) upon which Deleuze draws in order to construct his unusual notion of *image*.³² The latter is a kind of contingent node or relay point "by which pass," in Bergson's words, "in every direction, the modifications propagated throughout the immensity of the universe."³³ It is not difficult to see how Vertov's camera as read by Deleuze becomes at once an "image" of virtually total capaciousness and an (allegorical) "image" of the nature of images as such. Yet Bergson quite explicitly argues (in the crucial first chapter of *Matter and Memory*) that a *total* perception, a complete rejoining of preceptor with "the world of naked truth," would be indistinguishable from no consciousness at all:

Our representation of matter is the measure of our possible action upon bodies: it results from the discarding of what has no interest for our needs, or more generally, for our functions. In one sense we might say that the perception of any unconscious material point whatever, in its instantaneousness, is infinitely greater and more complete than ours, since this point gathers and transmits the influence of all the points of the material universe, whereas our consciousness only attains to certain parts and to certain aspects of those parts. Consciousness—in regard to external perception—lies in just this choice. But there is, in this necessary poverty of our conscious perception, something that is positive, that foretells spirit: it is, in the etymological sense of the word, discernment.

To perceive all the influences from all the points of all bodies would be to descend to the condition of a material object. Conscious perception signifies choice, and consciousness mainly consists in this practical discernment.³⁴

³¹ "Kinoks: A Revolution" in *Kino-Eye*: 16.

³² Bergson exerted an enormous influence on Russian and Soviet modernism as well, and it is probable that Vertov had some exposure to Bergsonism, particularly during the time he was studying psychology. See James Curtis, "Bergson and Russian Formalism," *Comparative Literature* 28:2 (1976): 109-21; Hilary Fink, *Bergson and Russian Modernism: 1900-1930* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1999); and Emma Widdis, *Visions of a New Land: Soviet Film from the Revolution to the Second World War* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2003): 70-75.

³³ Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. N.M. Paul and W.S. Palmer (NY: Zone Books, 1991): 36.

³⁴ *Matter and Memory*: 38, 48.

That is to say: consciousness exposed to stimuli from all “points” would indeed *immediately* “rejoin the material world,” be deprived of all vantage point. To be sure, Deleuze’s absolutely absorptive “agent of convergence” is a limit point, a capacity rather than a norm. Nonetheless, by flirting with perceptual disaster—the disaster of a total clogging of the channels and receptors of sensation—Deleuze’s notion intimates something of importance about the way Vertov’s films were in fact *perceived*.

For accusations of “sensory overload,” of *excess*—or more precisely, of incommensurability between human eye and kino-eye—dogged Vertov virtually from the time of his earliest feature documentaries. We see this even in the case of *One Sixth of the World*, a film formally rather less jarring and spectacular than the Ukrainian features to come. Reviewing the film, critic A. Zorich grumbled ambivalently about “the kaleidoscopic speed with which scenes, sights and faces flash across the screen.” For Zorich, “cinema by its nature does not tolerate slowness and immobility,” but he also insists that “[in the] dynamism and tension required by cinema, that sense of measure [*mera*] must be observed that allows us to fix *attention* on specific objects” (emphasis in the original).³⁵ L. Sosnovskii, veteran of the agit-trains, likewise argued that the speed with which images sped past in *One Sixth* made the viewer feel “flabbergasted and stupefied,” and asked that Vertov take into account the limitations of the ordinary spectator:

Fleeting glimpses of various mechanisms, without any explanation of their meaning, are absolutely incomprehensible to our peasant or Red Army soldier. When you simultaneously show Leningrad shot from an airplane, the airplane itself, and a normal view of Leningrad shot from the ground, and all of this moving around all at once on various sides of the screen, the trick may be diverting, but it merely serves to confuse the viewer [literally: dislodges the viewer from sense, *sbivaet zritel'ia s tolku*].³⁶

Of course, such charges were made with increasing frequency in the late 1920s, as Vertov’s approach reached its maximal complexity; perhaps the fiercest reproaches were reserved, as we shall see, for *Enthusiasm*.

Again, all of these not-wholly-theoretical complications can be summarized as paradoxes that seem to arise out of the dual foundation of Vertov’s art: non-acted film (documentary) and the mobile, capacious, “super-human” kino-eye. Non-acted film, by virtue of the inert immediacy of its materials, blocks the emergence of a totalizing social

³⁵ A. Zorich, “O *Shestoi chast' mira* (Kino-fil'm raboty Dzigi Vertova),” *Gudok* (8 January 1927); in RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 942, l. 5.

³⁶ L. Sosnovskii, “*Shestaia chast' mira*,” *Rabochaia gazeta* (5 May 1927); in RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 942, l. 7.

understanding out of artistic, mediating work upon those materials; any pretense at totalization within documentary either imposes an agitprop schema on the materials or shifts all the responsibility for understanding them onto the spectator, who can for her part do little more than project another arbitrary template upon the film. On the other side, the kino-eye, taken as the “agent of convergence,” apprehends *too* much and ultimately obliterates the possibility of any human grasp of what is shown onscreen, thereby returning—this time *across the surface of the screen*—to another (formalist) kind of mindless immediacy, at least from the viewer’s necessarily limited perspective.

My purpose here has not been to support or refute any of the positions just enumerated, but rather to map out the various logical possibilities and blockages they imply. Against this conceptual ground, in what follows I will sketch out in relief the main lines of what I take to be Vertov’s own position, one that evaluates both film’s powers of registration and its powers of synthesis and kinesis in significantly different ways. On the one hand, Vertov denies that documentary “materials” are ever simple, immediate “stuff”—this, not only because of all the familiar mediations constitutive of any cinematic production (selection, shooting, equipment, editing, and so on) but because the sights and sounds captured by documentary are drawn from coherent social environments. Thus, as engineer Olotnin insisted, the sights and sounds produced through labor processes have genuine meaning for the people engaged in those processes. Even as cinematic registrations, these social-perceptual worlds—the hyphen is required by Vertov’s thought—retain a foothold in those grammars of everyday existence.

On the other hand, cinema as “agent of convergence” is less an instrument for moving through and absorbing “the universe” as such, and more a device through which different worlds might be brought into the same perceptual space. In *Enthusiasm*, the worlds of labor (industrial sound) and of cultural production (music and mass spectacle) “converge” in an effort to make the one comprehensible—and even enjoyable—to the other. Vertov’s “formal” techniques—rhyming and overlapping of musical and “non-musical” sound, obscuring the origins of the sound, and provocative, disjunctive patterning of sound and image³⁷—are really mechanisms of *translation* between spaces of perception, heuristic devices that help make otherwise incomprehensible material understandable on more familiar terms. Cinema becomes a space where viewers experience a sensory expansion that is at once a cognitive and a social expansion, a place for encountering other citizens in terms of

what they experience every day. This expansion is not, to be sure, infinite—the film begins with the preliminary exclusion of religion from the social sphere—and in the two largely historical subsections that follow, I will show how *Enthusiasm*'s utopian invitation to collective experience was itself basically rejected, and how the film was relegated to a position of insignificance at a time when all meaning was coming to be determined by a bureaucratic “vanguard.”

³⁷ Fischer, in “*Enthusiasm: From Kino-Eye to Radio-Eye*,” gives a detailed outline of many of these techniques (33-36).