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Disorganized Noise: *Enthusiasm* and the Ear of the Collective¹

There by the furnace, and there by the anvil,
Behold thy sturdy blacksmiths swinging their sledges,
Overhand so steady, overhand they turn and fall with joyous clank,
Like a tumult of laughter.
Walt Whitman, "Song of the Exposition" (1871)

According to kino-eye, to show Ivanov playing Petrov means showing him as a person in real life and as an actor on the stage—not passing off his stage acting as his behavior in life and vice versa. Complete clarity. Before you, you have not Petrov but Ivanov playing Petrov.
Dziga Vertov²

More, perhaps, than any other Dziga Vertov film, *Enthusiasm: Symphony of the Donbass* (*Entuziazm: Simfoniia Donbassa*, USSR, 1930)³ overwhelms and disorients its viewers/auditors, especially upon a first screening. It would seem safe to assume that this impression of "difficulty" is stronger today than when the film was released in 1931, inasmuch as the particular sampling of modernity it offers—the First Five-Year Plan, the beginnings of Stalinist industrialization—now seems either distinctly residual and discredited

¹ Much of the present essay is based upon research I conducted in Moscow in spring and summer 2003 in the Russian State Museum of Literature and Art (RGALI). The Archive has graciously permitted publication here of several facsimiles of materials contained in f. 2091, op.1 and 2 (Vertov), specifically images 1,2,7,11, and 12. Image 12 also contains two small letters inscribed by me and not present in the original manuscript. I have also cited liberally from many files in f.2091 to which RGALI generously gave access, and particularly (in op.2) from hitherto unpublished materials in files 414, 415 and 417. The present essay was completed in August-September 2003, and submitted for review in October 2003 to two American university presses, from whence it was distributed to reviewers. Almost one year later, a special issue of the Austrian journal *Maske und Kothurn* (50. Jahrgang, Heft 1, 2004) devoted to Vertov appeared, containing an essay by one of those reviewers (Oksana Bulgakowa, "Vertov als Futurist oder Das Ohr gegen das Auge: *Enthusiasmus*," (pp. 17-47)) that likewise makes frequent reference to files 414, 415 and 417 of op.2 On page 25 of "Vertov als Futurist" appears an image identical to Image 12 of the present essay, including the aforementioned handwritten marks. Footnote 26 (p.23) of "Vertov als Futurist" contains information identical to that contained in footnote 24 of the fourth section ("Cacophony of the Donbass") of the present essay. The author would like to thank Elizabeth Papazian, Karla Oeler, Masha Salazkina, Katerina Clark, and the editors of *KinoKultura* for their comments on the essay.

² From Vertov's diary of 6 September 1936, in Dziga Vertov, *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, ed. and intro. Annette Michelson, trans. Kevin O'Brien (Berkeley, LA, and London: U of CA P, 1984): 198.

³ I indicate the title of the film in this way (with a colon) because both titles, *Enthusiasm* and *Symphony of the Donbass*, were attached to the film from its earliest stages (see for example the article by "Val. V.," "Simfoniia Donbassa" in *Diktatura Truda* (26 October 1929), among other references). *Enthusiasm* seems to have been the "primary" title, although *Symphony of the Donbass* was also often used independently.

or (more often) entirely unfamiliar; for us (excepting a few specialists), the language, the very *content* of the Plan's historical moment has passed into utter oblivion.

This is not to say that *Enthusiasm*, Vertov's first sound film, lacks comprehensible structure, whether large- or small-scale. A couple of viewings, perhaps augmented by a glance at Vertov's "scenario" for the film, are probably enough for an audience to grasp the film's overall tripartite form: beginning with an overture on the "clearing of social space" (through the abolition of the twin "opiates" of religion and alcohol) as precondition for socialist construction (reels 1 and 2); moving to the long middle section on the industrialization of the Donbass region of Ukraine (reels 3 through 5); and a last movement (reel 6) where the products of industrialization flow back to the USSR (most notably to the countryside) and are celebrated.⁴ But because the film refuses explicitly to announce this structure—opting instead, like *Man with the Movie Camera* (1929), to suppress overt exposition—it allows considerable room for incomprehension. Meanwhile, on the perceptual level, *Enthusiasm*'s extraordinary "industrial" soundtrack still has the power to startle any but the most diehard fans of *musique concrète*, which as a movement was possibly indebted to Vertov at its origins.⁵

Plus ça change... for it turns out that *Enthusiasm* was already regarded as confused and confusing by most of its first audiences in 1930/31. Positive reviews were evidently few. During the discussion following the film's first documented preview (in Kiev on 1 November 1930), Vertov's most single-minded supporter was an engineer named Olotnin, who had probably been invited to the preview as a "lay expert" (the majority of the others present were studio officials). Olotnin claimed that he found *Enthusiasm*, including its "noise and crashing," entirely comprehensible:

As a student I did my training in the Donbass, and know that each whistle-blast from a locomotive has its own meaning. [...] The film is essentially geared toward those for whom the majority of these sounds are comprehensible; those people "get" these sounds.⁶

⁴ See Vertov's written plan for "*Symphony of the Donbas (Enthusiasm)*" in *Kino-Eye*: 293-296.

⁵ This is at least suggested by the role played by *musique concrète* founder Pierre Schaeffer in motivating Georges Sadoul to write his *Dziga Vertov* (and begin the book with a chapter on "Le Montage des enregistrements"); see Bernard Eisenschitz, "Avertissement" in Sadoul, *Dziga Vertov* (Paris: Editions Champ Libre, 1971): 9; Douglas Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT P, 1999); and the excellent essay by Laurent Jullier, "*Enthousiasme!*: Travail de l'ouvrier, travail du cinéaste" in *Vertov: L'Invention du réel: Actes du colloque de Metz, 1996*, ed. Jean-Pierre Esquenazi (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997): 109.

⁶ The transcript of this discussion is in the Vertov files in the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (hereafter abbreviated as RGALI): the quote here is drawn from RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 417, l. 54.

Most of those who attended the previews, or at least those who let their views be known, felt very differently. At the discussion following the third preview (in Moscow on 8 February 1931), *Enthusiasm* was roundly chastised for lacking any “backbone,” any “political specific gravity,” any “purposefulness” (*napravlennost'*), any “orientation towards a conclusion” (*ustanovka na vyvod*); for “falling to pieces” and for failing to “organize the viewer.”⁷ This, claimed one discussant, was due to Vertov’s failure to organize the film’s unfolding around a single, all-representative protagonist—the agency of the Party as such:

There’s no point even talking about “enthusiasm” here, as there’s no trace of it; nor, even, is anything of the Party’s, of our orientation [*ustanovka*] in the film. The fundamental movers of construction are absent from the film: the role of the Party is not shown, nor that of the trade union [*profsoiuznye*] organizations, nor even that of the shock-worker brigades. The film is way out of date (*interjection from the audience*: by about 5 years) in terms of its orientation [*ustanovka*]. Visually, it leaves a confused, chaotic impression.⁸

On this reading, *Enthusiasm* is an acephalous film, largely because it does not present the enormous activity in the Donbass as subject to the direction of the “fundamental movers.” Instead (according to another speaker), Vertov the “machine-cultist” allows the movements of mindless gadgets to generate his film’s organizing principles, with the result that no meaningful *human* order ever emerges:

The Gastev⁹ approach noticeably lords over the entire film: the human being is but an appendage of the machine. Because the film has no “backbone,” it completely falls to pieces and we can’t see where it’s leading.¹⁰

If we take these criticisms seriously, Vertov’s symphony presents us with an interpretive riddle. *Enthusiasm* could not more clearly be a Five-Year Plan propaganda film; it incorporates, as we shall see, the very terminology of the Plan and of the “Planners” deep into its own texture. At the same time, and paradoxically, many have seen the film as lacking a centering perspective on what it shows us, offering instead a mere collection of visual and aural “samples,” rhythmically (but not conceptually) organized. Recent critical opinion of the film tends to emphasize one or the other side of the divide, with Jacques Aumont going so far

⁷ These quotes from the Moscow discussion (which lasted from 1:40 a.m. to 3:35 a.m.) are taken from RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 417, ll. 82, 79, 80, 82, and 82 respectively. The second preview took place in Kharkov on 2 January 1931 (RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 417, l. 65); I have seen transcripts from the Kiev and Moscow sessions only (see below). Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from foreign languages are my own.

⁸ RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 417, ll. 81-82.

⁹ A reference to the machine-obsessed ideology of the “production poet” Aleksei Gastev (1882-1941).

¹⁰ RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 417, l. 82.

as to assert that “all the tension [in *Enthusiasm*], all the complexity and all the torsion has no goal but to ensure that the [ideological] meaning is conveyed,”¹¹ and others judging the film an incoherent mess, or merely a “failed” propaganda film. But are other resolutions of the riddle available?

In the following section, I will be dealing with an issue basic to any consideration of Vertov’s art: the question of his films’ susceptibility, or resistance, to comprehension by an audience. To what degree are Vertov’s films built around a coherent “standpoint”; how does that standpoint relate to the “documentary” materials of which the films are made; to what extent is that standpoint understandable from a spectator’s perspective? We will see that these questions were posed and continue to be posed (if only indirectly) by all those who have written seriously on Vertovian cinema. Theoretically, the questions will force us at the outset to ponder the ramifications of the twin bases of “kino-eye” practice—the strict reliance on “documentary” materials and a radicalization of montage in the direction of absolute perceptual mobility—as the coexisting halves of an apparently unstable cinematic aesthetic. I will argue, based on a reading both of sections of *Enthusiasm* and of (mostly hitherto unknown) statements by the filmmaker, that Vertov attempts not simply to “document” Soviet reality, nor only to unleash film’s kinetic power throughout the visible and audible universe. Instead, he hopes to establish cinema as a kind of surrogate public space or what I call a “sensory *agora*,” wherein the perceptual worlds of different segments of Soviet society—as registered by the camera and sound recording apparatus—could at once be experienced, contrasted, compared, and ultimately grasped as familiar elements of an expanding sensorium.

I will try to show that Vertov believed—rather like engineer Olotnin seemed to—that there is no “incomprehensible” documentary material; indeed, that all of it plays a coherent role in specific if hitherto alienated spheres of society. A new collective existence, according to Vertov, requires an education, not “of the senses” in some general sense, but rather *in* the sensory environments of all the members of the society, in order that the “noise,” the misunderstood and dishonored perceptual worlds of “others”—and particularly of working people—might gradually be understood and incorporated into the creative imaginations of Soviet citizens as a group. Cinematic technology, with its powers of mobility, synthesis and projection, becomes a relay point—internally mediated, to be sure—through which new perceptual material can enter into public consciousness, and new “partitions of the

¹¹ Jacques Aumont, “Avant-garde: de quoi? A propos d’*Enthousiasme* (1930)” in *Vertov : L’Invention du réel*: 55.

perceptible” (Jacques Rancière)¹² can be produced. Finally, I will try to show that the notion of a “sensory *agora*,” which might on the one hand profitably be integrated into the history of later mass (especially *televised*) media, also helps to reveal how Vertov’s famous bias against “acted cinema” can be regarded (though not unambivalently) as a proto-Situationist critique of (political) *representation*, and how, on the other, Vertov’s desire to circumvent the representational barrier is grounded in a utopian faith in the relatively “unmediated” character of cinematic registrations.

It will prove useful, however, to insert at this point an extended theoretical parenthesis on the debate over the question of “vantage-point” in Vertov’s cinema as it has unfolded over nearly seven decades, prior to offering our own account of Vertov’s orientation. Only a few central positions will be sketched out here, of course, but enough to demonstrate both the continuity and importance of the discussion, and the thorny and apparently insuperable logical impasses that have arisen in attempting to reconcile Vertov’s “documentary” and “montage” precepts.

¹² Cf. Jacques Rancière, “The Aesthetic Revolution and Its Outcomes: Emplotments of Autonomy and Heteronomy,” *New Left Review* (second series) 14 (March-April 2002): 133-151; and *Le Partage du sensible: Esthétique et politique* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2000).