Presenting the Cyborg's Futurist Past : an Analysis of Dziga Vertov's Kino-Eye

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Introduction

Contemporary discussions about gender in cyberspace often rely on assumptions about the immanently liberatory potential of technology. Undoubtedly much of this enthusiasm for technology has been generated by Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto", the foundational essay on cyborg subjectivity. Haraway embraces technology's disruption of such previously stable borders as that between the organism and the machine. She is making "an argument for pleasure in the confusion of boundaries... an effort to contribute to socialist-feminist culture and theory in a postmodernist, non-naturalist mode and in the tradition of imagining a world without gender" (Haraway 150). But amid all the enthusiasm for a postgender cyberspace, it is important to remember that Haraway is not the first to imagine a world without gender in the coupling of humans and machines. The writers of the Futurist movement of the early twentieth century precede her vision, but to achieve it they called for the elimination of the feminine.

In an essay entitled "War, Sole Hygiene of the World", the premiere theorist of the Italian Futurist movement, F. T. Marinetti, "specifies that the ideal universe remains devoid of women, consisting only of men and machines" (Orban 56). The passage creates a troubling obstacle for theories of the cyborg which attempt to establish a connection between the disappearance of the techno/organic boundary and the disappearance of gender. Perhaps for that reason, the Futurist roots of the cyborg have been largely ignored in the hope that the technological advances which have made the cyborg "our ontology" (Haraway 150) have eliminated Marinetti's misogyny.

Instead of ignoring the Futurist roots of the cyborg, I have chosen to explore alternatives to the misogyny inherent in Marinetti's writings on Futurism. The Russian Futurists, for example, though their platform was very similar to the Italians' in their hatred of bourgeois conventions, differed remarkably in two areas which the Italians saw as fundamental for escaping those conventions : the glorification of war and the demonization of women. Particularly in the work of Dziga Vertov, filmmaker and theorist of the early Soviet era, the anti-feminist stance of the Italian Futurists is rejected in favor of a representational strategy that privileges women as filmic subjects without reinforcing patterns of visual pleasure that support bourgeois patriarchal ideology. In what follows I will examine the traces of Futurism that inform Dziga Vertov's *Man With a Movie Camera* (1929) and discuss the way that Vertov's cyborg construction, the Kino Eye, destabilizes the gender hierarchy that underlies bourgeois capitalism without eliminating women from the world of the text. By foregrounding its own process of production, and displaying both men and women involved in creating the film, *Man With a Movie Camera* radically departs from the bourgeois conventions which all Futurists despised; but it does so without scapegoating women.

Man With a Movie Camera is the result of Vertov's ten-year effort to work out a theory of technologically-assisted vision. "Kino-Eye" is the name he gave to his theory, and it involves not only a disappearance of the border between the camera and the eye but a dissolution in the stages separating the process of film production as well. Vertov's cameraman and brother, Mikhail Kaufman, appears in the film as often as Vertov's editor and wife, Elizaveta Svilova. As a historical representation of the cyborg that promotes strategies for minimizing the

hierarchical stratification of gender, the film serves as a model for contemporary discussions of postgender cyberspace. Rather than eliminating one or both genders in a human/machine merger, Vertov balances the masculine and feminine contributions to the production of meaning in what may be the first revolutionary cybertext, *Man With a Movie Camera*, with the first revolutionary cyborg, the Kino-Eye.

The Futurist Roots of the Cyborg

"*After being conquered by Futurist eyes our multiplied sensibilities will at last hear with Futurist ears. In this way the motors and machines of our industrial cities will one day be consciously attuned, so that every factory will be transformed into an intoxicating orchestra of noises.*"
-- Luigi Russolo

Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto" outlines a number of boundaries that have been broken by the late twentieth century in the United States. For discussions of the cyborg, the most important of these is the distinction between organism and machine which she says is now "thoroughly ambiguous" (152). As Haraway notes, "our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves, frighteningly inert" (152). In creating a postmodern cyborg subjectivity, Haraway acknowledges changes in our conception of the various binary structures which modernist notions of subjectivity were founded upon. High modernist works such as The Scream illustrate the split in the subject, a division between the subject's inside and outside, which the modernists define as alienation. This division and its implications "are no longer appropriate to the world of the postmodern", as Fredric Jameson notes (14). Strict distinctions between signifier and signified, subject and object, reality and representation have collapsed in the wake of the late twentieth century's poststructuralist critique. Haraway's extension of this critique into the line dividing organic and inorganic matter is as much a product of postmodern/poststructuralist thinking as a contribution to it. Likewise, when Haraway states that "the cyborg is a creature in a postgender world" (150), she acknowledges the fragmentation of gender as a binary structure, as well.

The early Futurists would have found it difficult to engage in this particular border dispute. As modernists they were thoroughly entrenched in the kind of binary thinking that separated organic from inorganic and masculinity from femininity. As a result their conception of the cyborg is only apparent through their pairings of men and machines in their art. In "The Founding Manifesto of Futurism", Marinetti makes clear that man with machine is the subject of the future. "We want to hymn the man at the wheel, who hurls the lance of his spirit across the Earth" (21), Marinetti writes in point number 5. This follows the oft-quoted statement in point number 4 which affirms that a roaring motorcar is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace. For Marinetti the future was guaranteed to "Man" by his insoluble bond to machines. Woman and femininity belonged to the past, to the 19th century. The connection with women and institutions of the past is made obvious in point number 10, which reads, "We will destroy the museums, libraries, academies of every kind, will fight moralism, feminism, every opportunistic or utilitarian cowardice" (22). The future belonged to men.

The Russian Futurists were different, though, like the Italians, they disdained the past and the various institutions which preserved it. Their founding manifesto reads, "The Academy and Pushkin are less intelligible than hieroglyphics. Throw Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, etc. overboard from the Ship of Modernity" (Burliuk et al 51). But Russian Futurism and Italian Futurism were never as closely aligned as their common name would suggest. In his 1927 article, "We Are the Futurists", Osip Brik acerbically states, "Russian Futurists arose long before Marinetti became well known in Russia. And when Marinetti came to Russia in January 1914, the Russian Futurists met him with complete animosity (252-252). Still, Brik concedes that the Russian Futurists "have made use of certain of the Italian Futurist's slogans...".

The points Brik repudiates in this crucial essay reveal the stark differences between Russian and Italian Futurism. Point number 5, which hymns the "man at the wheel", has already been discussed, as has point 10, which vows to destroy feminism, as well as museums, libraries, and academies. Perhaps the most objectionable notions, though, are contained in point 9. It reads : "We will glorify war -- the world's only hygiene -- militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of freedom-bringers, beautiful ideas worth dying for, and scorn for woman" (Marinetti 22). The Russian Futurists never relied on the glorification of war or misogyny to advance their platform celebrating humanity's union with technology. The intention behind Russian Futurist art was "not the hymning of technology, but its control in the name of the interests of humanity" (Mayakofsky 35).

In the work of Dziga Vertov, we can see how the Russian Futurists recuperated the essentially cyborg notion of combining technology and humanity from the misogynist trap into which the Italians fell. Vertov's cyborg construction was originally conceived as a device for enhancing human optics, as this 1923 statement suggests : "I am kino-eye, I am a mechanical eye. I, a machine, show you the world as only I can see it" (17). But Kino-Eye's first person address already suggests a merger between human and machine, something that would be further explored and complicated in Vertov's later writings.

By the time *Man With a Movie Camera* was made, Vertov's conception of the Kino-Eye was divided into the three stages of the production process that he and his collaborators used to create their films. In 1929, Vertov wrote : "Kino-eye = kino-seeing (I see through the camera) + kino-writing (I write on film with the camera) + kino-organization (I edit)" (87). These three stages correspond perfectly to the three positions occupied by Elizaveta Svilova, Dziga Vertov, and Mikhail Kaufman, collectively known as "The Council of Three" (12).

As the camera-man, and Vertov's brother, Mikhail Kaufman fulfilled the kino-seeing function, Vertov himself, as director, was responsible for what was shot, the kino-writing, and Elizaveta Svilova, Vertov's wife, edited their pieces.

The Kino-Eye, then, is a cyborg construction that contains multiple positions for the production of film meaning. Those positions were obviously chosen so that equitable contributions could be made from representatives of each gender (the apparently uneven number of males and females in the Council of Three will be explained later, in light of the importance of editing in Soviet filmmaking, relative to the other stages of production). It is the first example of a theory of the cyborg that does not rely on a misogynistic eradication of the feminine in order to unite man and machine. In order to see how the Kino-Eye works in a film text we must now examine *Man With a Movie Camera*.

Man With a Movie Camera

As the last of Vertov's silent films, *Man With a Movie Camera* stands at the peak of the Soviet avant garde film movement of the twenties, and extends the most thorough vision of Vertov's understanding of the combination of the human and the machine implicit in the term Kino-Eye. The subject of *Man With a Movie Camera* is the cyborg; it is not "man". Vertov associated man as subject with the bourgeois filmmaking he hoped to supplant with Kino-Eye filmmaking. In a polemical treatise reminiscent of the early Futurist writings, Vertov attacks the mainstream tradition of the narrative "film-drama" which draws upon previous bourgeois conventions, such as the romance and psychological novel. Vertov writes, "the 'psychological' prevents man from being as precise as a stopwatch; it interferes with his desire for kinship with the machine". In banishing the conventions of bourgeois cinema, Vertov also eliminates the human character, as he acknowledges in this statement : "for his inability to control his movements. We temporarily exclude man as a subject for film" (7).

Vertov's exclusion of "man" as a subject for film has a double meaning. Not only does it allude to the need for a filmic subject able to transcend the imprecision of the traditional psychologically motivated narrative, but this same subject must not be gendered in a way which implicates the viewer in the logic of the look so essential to maintaining power relationships in patriarchal culture. It is the look, or "gaze", and its obvious association with scopophilic pleasure, which Laura Mulvey has discussed as essential to maintaining patriarchal power relationships. Mulvey writes :

> Woman... stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning. (15)

This is where *Man With a Movie Camera* presents the greatest challenge to mainstream filmmaking. While excluding man as subject of the film, Vertov also includes woman as maker of meaning.

Man With a Movie Camera begins with a shot of a movie camera, facing the viewer, and from out of the top of the camera a miniature Mikhail Kaufman climbs with his camera and tripod, aims it at the offscreen space to the right, and begins to crank. A cut reveals the top of a building, which, according to the conventions of mainstream narrative cinema, where the spectator identifies with the look of a character, is presumably the object the cameraman is filming. But already this simple association begins to subvert those conventions it appears to follow, as Judith Mayne points out in her analysis of this segment :

> The "how" precedes the "what"; the image is designated as a product of the cinematic process, and not as a reflection of a world outside that of the film. The following two shots repeat a similar pattern with slight differences. In shot three, the cameraman is seen at an increased distance; and the angle of shot four, a lamppost, is slightly different from the angle of shot two. A puzzling reversal occurs as well : the off-center but nonetheless continuous match between shots one and two is impossible between shots three and four, since in shot three the cameraman picks up his equipment and moves off-screen. Thus a sense of continuity is established and violated at the same time (Mayne 159).

Following these four brief shots, we see the cameraman, now in scale with his surroundings, entering the movie theater through the curtains and heading to the projection booth. He then threads the projector with what the logic of continuity driven cinema would have us believe is the film he has just exposed. This completely elides the processes in between shooting and screening a film.

Here the particulars of the filmmaking process are not hidden to disguise aspects of the film's production as in mainstream narrative cinema, which does not wish to jeopardize the viewer's pleasure, but rather to avoid the possibility of showing that process so completely that a narrative centered on filmic production might arise from the very attempt to subvert traditional narrative. Again, a sense of continuity is established and violated. This pattern of foregrounding the process of production appears again and again throughout the film, because "the film aims to take the spectator from a position of unreflective consumption of cinema to one of actively producing the film's meaning" (Crofts and Rose 15). This is a crucial point, and will be returned to shortly, but I will first address a problem regarding the opening sequence.

Reading the opening sequence as a narrative preliminary to the rest of the film sets up the cameraman as the central character which would then appear to violate Vertov's exclusion of "man" as a subject of film, and

reinstitute the gendered hierarchy which Mulvey critiques. However, it soon becomes apparent through scenes such as the one in which a young woman's eyes blinking are intercut with venetian blinds opening and closing that there is no central character to this film. In fact it is possible to determine this even before the venetian blind scene as Mayne displays in stating :

> From the very beginning... the centrality of the cameraman's vision is put into question, since he moves out of frame in the third shot of the film. In other words, the cameraman cannot be equated with a central character, or even the central narrating intelligence of a narrative film, since visual perspective is not localized in a single figure, but dispersed through multiple perspectives. (162)

This notion of the visual subject dispersed through multiple perspectives is as fundamental to an understanding of the Kino-Eye as an essentially cyborg construction as the combining of human and machine, which is also seen throughout the film.

The Kino-Eye, then, can be understood as an ideological weapon, a cyborg combination of human and movie camera, which both creates and depends upon multiple perspectives for its interpretation and communication. In taking the spectator from the position of passive consumer to active producer of cinematic meaning, the Kino-Eye functions as a contagious "virus", contained in the film text. Once infected by it the viewer becomes Kino-Eye, "challenging the human eye's visual representation of the world and offering its own 'I see'" (Mayne 21). Through a new form of visualization it begins to destabilize the various hierarchies which patriarchal capitalism depends upon for maintaining hegemonic dominance.

The most prevalent hierarchy destabilized is gender. Several writers have commented on the complex way that gender is questioned in *Man With a Movie Camera* since most of the subjects of the camera are women. Kaufman is the human figure who appears most frequently in the film, but he never appears in close-up, thereby making character identification quite difficult, and he never appears without his camera, which suggests that he is not gendered male, but cyborg. In other words he is not man as bearer of the look, but man, bearer of the camera. Even more important, though, is the presence of Vertov's wife and editor, Elizaveta Svilova, at the editing table creating cinematic meaning from ribbons of celluloid.

Svilova appears about 21 minutes, or one-third of the way into this 66-minute film, seated at her editing table, with scissors in hand, cutting the film and cement-splicing it into new patterns. About one minute before she appears a series of freeze-frame stills, beginning with a horse pulling a carriage and ending with close-up faces of people, appears for the first time in the film. Since *Man With a Movie Camera* uses all manner of camera and editing techniques, the use of freeze-frames isn't unusual. But in this instance the stills prepare us for a pseudo-identification with Svilova's "gaze", since she sees the film first as an extensive strip of separate images. In some of the images we even see the perforated sprocket holes at the edge of the frame, completely demystifying the illusion of cinematic continuity as well as mimesis.

Svilova's appearance as the editor in this film is somewhat more complex than Kaufman's appearance as cameraman because of the place that editing had in the hierarchy of Soviet silent film theory. In numerous articles advanced by Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Kuleshov, and Vertov, editing, or "montage", was given prominence as the most important aspect of filmmaking. Pudovkin's famous quote that, "the film is not shot, but built, built up from the separate strips of celluloid that are its raw material" (Leyda 211), serves as a not-so-subtle reminder of the place of editing, and of cinematography in the filmmaking process of the early Soviets. However, it may be pointed out that the film is entitled *Man With a Movie Camera*, not "Woman With a Pair of Scissors". The important thing here is not so much whether the cameraman or the editor serves as the privileged locus of signifying practice, rather it is the way in which the gender hierarchy is destabilized by the Kino-Eye, which must now include the eyes of the editor as part of its totality.

Further examples of the way that gender is destabilized by the Kino-Eye include the ambiguous nature of the eye itself when reflected in the lens of the camera. Lynne Kirby, in "From Marinetti to Vertov : Woman on the Track of Avant-Garde Representation", argues that the eye we see superimposed over the camera lens is not Kaufman's, but rather the eye of a woman who is awakened by a train passing over the cameraman who lies on the tracks. According to Kirby, "The association of the camera lens and shutter with the woman's eye is the most frequently cited example of the self-reflexive operations of Vertov's film. That this is first a woman's eye, however is often overlooked" (313). For Kirby, the Kino-Eye is a feminine machine set in motion, or awakened by the passing of a train over the body of the cameraman. But I see a more gender-neutral identity for the Kino-Eye. In the sequence of shots Kirby cites (approximately eight and a half minutes into the film), the cameraman does appear to be run over by the train at the very point when a woman wakes and begins to look around. But immediately following the shots comprising his being run over, which include close-ups of his feet and head on the tracks, quickly spliced between shots of the train rushing by, the cameraman gets up unscathed and walks back to a car waiting to drive him away. The fact that the cameraman is completely unharmed by his encounter with the train rules out any possibility of perceiving this sequence as strictly violent. Kirby, however, argues that the train, the woman awakening, and more specifically the shots of her dressing which follow constitute "the setting in motion of a sexual imaginary...". (313). Indeed there are erotic undercurrents pervading this film, which doesn't hesitate to display in fragmented form semiclad bathers at the beach, the slow motion bodies of both male and female athletes performing various feats, even a woman giving birth. But the eroticism is always mitigated by the gender-neutrality of the Kino-Eye, which does not indulge in the kind of scopophilic fantasy narrative so common in mainstream Hollywood cinema.

The erotic undercurrents in *Man With a Movie Camera* are impossible to explain using theories in which desire is either masculine or feminine, but theories of the cyborg explain the eroticism in this film quite adequately. William R. Macauley and Angel J. Gordo-Lopez, in their article "From Cognitive Psychologies to Mythologies", discuss seduction and technological abandonment of the body through the performance artist, Stelarc : "he claims that mutilation of the body is an obligatory passage point for our communion with technological webs" (435). In light of this quote, the initial train scene, in which Kaufman appears to be run over, can be viewed as the obligatory passage point for the cameraman's transformation into the Kino-Eye, awakened by the "mutilation" of Kaufman's body. But in *Man With a Movie Camera*, the merger that occurs is as much with the awakened woman as it is with technology.

This is the real source of the erotic undercurrent in *Man With a Movie Camera*. The Kino-Eye is neither masculine nor feminine. Vertov emphasizes its hybrid nature both as a techno/organic and as a postgender creation. In her analysis of the film Kirby even suggests this by attempting to locate a "di--vision... between a feminine and masculine voyeurism" (309). By hyphenating the word, "di--vision", Kirby appears to be searching, not so much for two separate types of voyeurism, which the word "division" would imply, as two related types -- a double vision. Understanding the Kino-Eye as a gender-neutral, or more appropriately, androgynous human-machine construction, makes this di--vision, a scopophilic desire to understand other cyborgs, or as Vertov would put it, "the sensory exploration of the world through film" (14).

Conclusion

While *Man With a Movie Camera* has been closely examined as a Marxist and constructivist text (most notably in Stephen Croft's and Olvia Rose's "An Essay Towards Man With a Movie Camera"), the film's value as a cybertext has gone largely untapped. This comes as a bit of a surprise since Dziga Vertov's depiction of the Kino-Eye in *Man With a Movie Camera* has much in common with the postmodern cyborg that Donna Haraway

has theorized in the "Cyborg Manifesto". Like Haraway's cyborg, the Kino-Eye is not dependent upon an organic ontology, and its multiple perspectives closely resemble the heterogenous points of entry which characterize Haraway's conception of cyborg subjectivity.

Italian Futurism glorified the union of man and machine, but Vertov's Kino-Eye escaped this binary perception of gender which lead Marinetti to efface the feminine. The Kino-Eye embraces the feminine perspective and represents woman as maker of meaning in *Man With a Movie Camera*. Vertov's decision to completely foreground the production process was a bold move even for an avant-garde filmmaker, since many of his contemporaries were still working largely within the narrative tradition. No less bold was his decision to emphasize the contribution of women. *Man With a Movie Camera* presents these two separate agendas seamlessly in a direct reversal of the Classical Hollywood style which hides the process of production. Classical Hollywood Cinema also presents woman as spectacle for masculine pleasure. The pleasure in *Man With a Movie Camera* begins with liberation from gender hierarchy.

In contemporary discussions of gender in cyberspace the equitable representation of women is not a foregone conclusion. The cyborg has done as much to reify existing stereotypes about gender as it has to eradicate them. Hyper-masculine cyborg creations portrayed by Arnold Schwarzenneger in the *Terminator* movies suggest that the dream of the Italian Futurists, a world devoid of women, leaving only men and machines, rules Hollywood today. For this reason it is even more important to seek out historical representations of the cyborg that promote strategies for minimizing the hierarchical stratification of gender. In this paper I have tried to suggest that there is a wealth of relevant theory in the revolutionary work of the Russian Futurists. Vertov's Kino-Eye is one applicable example of a responsible paradigm for managing the merger of technology and humanity.

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