VERTOV, DZIGA (b. 2 January 1896, Bialystok, Poland; d. 12 February 1954, Moscow, Russia)

Derived from the sound of a working film-reel and the word ‘vertet´sia’ (to spin), Dziga Vertov is the pseudonym of David (aka Denis) Kaufman, a Soviet documentarian and prominent avant-garde director. Like his Futurist and Constructivist associates, Vertov believed machines would liberate people from their physical and cognitive limitations. Viewing cinema as a hybrid human-mechanical mode of perception, he asserted that it could transcend subjectivity and unveil aspects of reality not otherwise accessible, because the camera’s ability to show us ‘life caught unawares’ (*Kino-Eye*, 41) helped the edited film product to ‘show and elucidate life as it is’ (*Kino-Eye*, 47).

Vertov’s neo-empiricist methodology originated with his early journalistic experience making a newsreel series called [*Kino-nedelia*](http://www.filmmuseum.at/en/collections/dziga_vertov_collection/kinonedelja_-_online_edition) (*Cinema-Week*; 1918-19). In 1919 he formed a group named ‘Kino Glaz’ (Cinema Eye), along with his editor, Elizaveta Svilova, whom he married in 1923, and his brother Mikhail Kaufman. The members called themselves ‘kinoki’ (cine-eyes). Vertov outlined their principles in ‘We: Variant of a Manifesto’ (1922). Decrying theatrical cinema, he insisted that film’s potential to reveal truth could only be realized when filmmakers overcame their addiction to scripts, actors, costumes and sets. From his perspective, the production methods of theatrical cinema obligated filmmakers to peddle illusions and thereby perpetuated bourgeois values.

Such proclamations resulted in a polemic between Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein during the mid-20s. Meanwhile, Vertov made several films that demonstrated his philosophy, most notably the aptly titled *Cinema-Eye* (1924) and two films commissioned as propaganda pieces — *A Sixth of the World* (1926) and *Stride, Soviet!* (1926). Goskino, the studio that employed him, was displeased with the experimental nature of the commissions. They dismissed him just as he began working on [*Man with a Movie Camera*](http://archive.org/details/ChelovekskinoapparatomManWithAMovieCamera) (1929), originally conceived as a city symphony in Moscow.

The Ukrainian Photography and Film Institute (VUFKU) hired Vertov, and he completed *Man with a Movie Camera* with footage shot in Kiev and Odessa. Widely considered to be his masterpiece, it is a compendium of his techniques and principles, such as candid photography, quick cuts, stop-motion animation, double exposures, reverse sequences and melodic repetitions. The opening credits explain that the film is a cinematic experiment showing actual events without the help of intertitles, a screenplay, or theatrical devices (actors, sets, costumes). Thus it relies solely on montage, which Vertov believed to be the international language of cinema that distinguishes film from literature and theater.

While at VUFKU, Vertov made [*Enthusiasm (Symphony of the Donbass*](http://archive.org/details/Peleon-SimfonijaDonbassaEntuziazm243)*)* (1930), his first experiment with sound in cinema, and [*Three Songs about Lenin*](http://archive.org/details/threesongsoflenin) (1934). After that, however, his career declined, and he found himself marginalized as Socialist Realism displaced the avant-garde. Nevertheless, Vertov’s ideas have proven influential and prescient. For example, the *Cinema Verité* movement, named after his 1922-24 newsreels, *Kino-Pravda* (*Cinema-Truth*), echoed his claims that film provides unprecedented means of metaphysical inquiry. Today, *YouTube* supplies a massive stream of the type of footage Vertov believed could reveal less readily apparent truths when edited into a film product (and the Ridley Scott production of Kevin MacDonald’s [*Life in a Day*](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JaFVr_cJJIY) [2011] uses crowdsourcing to do just that), while the growing ubiquity of surveillance cameras in industrialized nations is a Vertovian dream come true.

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