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The Films of Dziga Vertov

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Examining Dziga Vertov's theory of the interval through representations of age

Investigating the work of Soviet experimental filmmaker Dziga Vertov may benefit from a slight realignment of the conception of his role, as Vlada Petric argued in his 1978 paper “Dziga Vertov as Theorist,” giving more recognition to the “experimental” aspect. Organizer, author-director, experiment-supervisor: Vertov’s credits for himself in his films, *Kino-Eye* (1924), *A Sixth Part of the World* (1926), and *Man With A Movie Camera* (1929), reveal a concern for any applied notions of authorship to include scientific authority as well as creative potential — similar to an observation from John MacKay, which also discusses his preferences for the labels “engineer” or “kinok” (MacKay 12). As opposed to the temperamental artist figure he often took to writing to denounce, he can instead be seen as an experimental theorist working through the medium of film. This is also appropriately acknowledging his academic background, as he had an interest in studying human perception when enrolled at the Psychoneurological Institute (Cook 80). Understanding Vertov as a theorist naturally draws attention to the theories being tested themselves, including the prominent but rather abstract theory of the interval, which

synthesizes notions of calculus, music theory and optical physiology into a conception of filmic meaning-making as existing “between” two shots, with the phenomenon of the imagined continuity between consecutive images generating understanding itself. This concept is a major organizing tool for Vertov, a major component of the act of creating a true *kinok* film-thing from film-facts, as the organization of images into affective, dynamic intervals is the Vertovian montage in summary. According to Vertov himself, some films may be more demonstrative of his filmic techniques and theories in attempted action, most notably *Man With A Movie Camera* and *The Eleventh Year* (1927) (Petric 37). But, once understanding the theory of the interval as a vital organizing structure throughout his feature length work and as intrinsic to the concept of the kino-eye itself, nearly any sequence can be interpreted on the level of the Vertovian interval.

This leaves the question of what exactly to break down: while this paper focuses on representations of old and young age, productive explorations could center dichotomies of gender, rural/urban society or other dividing lines within the Soviet context. Vertov’s frequently synecdochical work of using his filmed subjects to represent the Soviet society at large makes age an appropriate framework for this analysis, as representations of youth and old age serve as embodiments for the people of the future and the past of the Russian Revolution, the Soviet nation-building project and the First Five Year Plan. Additionally, a generational frame is especially apt given the Soviet context. Youth was emphasized as the goal turned to nation-building and the younger generations who would live on to populate successive decades and create the new Soviet person were seen as constructors of communism, with the youth league Komsomol serving as a prime tool in that mission and the elimination of generational conflict in theory in favor of class allegiance — while social historian Matthias Neumann writes that this was the theory, rifts emerged between those formed by the pre-Revolutionary world and those

who came after or during the Revolution imbued with a kind of communist purity. This context makes age a compelling area to examine in Vertov's filmography, as the filmmaker would have been essentially tasked with using youth as revolutionary symbol while using old age to both criticize the past and form a bridge to present and future unity in a politically productive way — as the context for his applications of the interval. This paper seeks to center the theory of the interval as a guiding interpretative scheme for Vertov's work; first through a discussion of the interval arguing its prominence as a theoretical framework for filmic perception, then through examining how Soviet attitudes toward youth and aging serve as the basis for an interval-constructed filmic arguments in *Kino Eye*, *Man With A Movie Camera* and *A Sixth Part of the World*.

Applying the interval to the social body

In "We: Variant of a Manifesto," Vertov defines the interval as the transition from one movement to another, the structural brick of the "phrases" that compose a film:

"...the material, the elements of the art of movement, and by no means the movements themselves. It is they (the intervals) which draw the movement to a kinetic resolution."
(Vertov, "Kino Eye" 70)

This kinetic resolution seems especially valuable given Vertov's preoccupation with movement and dynamism. However, despite its inclusion in the foundational work of Vertov's filmic movement, the theory of the interval still remains elusive. Leading Vertov scholar John MacKay has described the theory of the interval as "enigmatic," "well-known but obscure" and stimulating for "filmmakers and theorists alike," confirming it as an intriguing area of study in of itself going on a century after its conception (MacKay 2). The theory of the interval is an

expansion of Vertov's larger concept of the kino-eye, based in studies of perception, mathematics and calculus comparing the capabilities of the human eye to the possibilities of the camera.

The concept expanded from one of perception, influenced by other discussions of the camera as an eye, to a montage theory, considering two shots next to each other as the "images" while the interval existed as the relationship and "space" between them, and then again expanded to considering the organization of these intervals within the sequence itself. These expansions shift from perception and cognitive processing of logic to larger rhetorical, narrative and intellectual schemas Vertov employs in his work, a kind of internal negotiation between consistencies and inconsistencies in form — from images, to shots (or "phrases") and then to sequences — to form a logical conclusion. A more concrete explanation of how the oft-abstract interval is applied can be seen in a lecture Vertov gave in Paris, where he identified the five most important interactions that intervals are formed off of: 1. shot scales 2. angles 3. movements within shots 4. light and dark and 5. shooting speeds (Petric 36). The organizer must also determine the duration of a shot and the order for maximum effect.

This effect, in Vertov's work of capturing unacted life as it was, is showing real life to a wider audience — Simon Cook draws a connection between physiological cinema documenting functions of the human body and Vertov's cinema documenting functions of the *social* body, and argues that the fragmentary nature of a society inherently requires a montage-based approach: "But while an individual body in motion can be filmed in its entirety, the social body cannot. If Vertov understood his kino-eye as an epistemological instrument to be used in the service of a Marxist social science, then in turning the camera from the individual

animal organism to the social organism as a whole, Vertov was faced with the fact that his camera could record only partial fragments of the totality of society” (Cook 86).

This segmented nature again reminds us of the life cycle itself, that film cannot reasonably capture a person’s life at every stage, but can only capture slices of the life experience — in this case the imagined spaces between shown ages serves as the interval with the viewer projecting their own experiences on some level, and the relevant constructed sensation could be, for example, an intended identification between viewer and subject.

The builders of communism: depictions of youth

Vertov frequently uses children and youth as metaphors for the new Soviet man, the new revolutionary society and the future itself. These applications fit neatly into Bolshevik ideals of youthful excitement as a vessel for revolutionary, communist action. . Lenin himself realized the weight of generations and their political power as symbols, as reflected in his 1920 speech to the Third Komsomol Congress on the power of the younger generations, saying: “But the generation of those who are now fifteen will see a communist society, and will itself build this society. This generation should know that the entire purpose of their lives is to build a communist society” (Neumann 275).

Vertov certainly embraces this instrumental role for youth in his films — his first feature film, *Kino-Eye*, even goes as far as to claim a collective authorship between Vertov’s kinoks and the Young Pioneers, a mass youth organization within the Soviet Union for ages 9-15. Though the Pioneers are empowered through this supposed authorial role, they are still the subject of the film itself as they live and work to promote communism and state resources to the adults around them. Through constructions of the interval, Vertov aligns youth in *Kino-Eye* with progress, but

in a distinctly militaristic way as seen through marches and one sequence of them “gathering the troops,” or collecting the Young Pioneers from the camp as they head out for the day, where we can identify size, enthusiasm and idealism constructed via the interval.



We see consistencies in shooting speeds and movements between the shots in the sequence, so we see we are in one consistent filmic reality unified by the children running to join the formation. But we can also identify changes in shot scales between the child drummer boy and the scene at large and angle changes between capturing the scene neutrally and looking slightly down on the drummer, forming a dynamic sense of the camera as moving around the scene to build momentum, which is bolstered by decreasing shot length for the shots of the drummer boy. Once his purpose has been established, that the viewer knows he is calling other children to him, we don't need to see the shots for as long *and* differentiation is adding to an enthusiastic rhythm.



Another notable basis for interval construction in this sequence is light and dark in the frame — it ends with the gathered “troops” marching off into the distance, into one of the lightest parts of

the sequence and the lighter top half of the frame (along an impressively sharply-divided line, considering it was captured in nature) and toward the light of what we assume to be progress.

Given *Man with a Movie Camera*'s dual role as examination of the Soviet social body and display of technique in action, youth-relevant intervals can arguably be seen as proving the power and prominence of child-as-image in filmic language: though the Soviet context is obviously intrinsic to these representations, a universal filmic communication certainly benefits from the shared social experience of childhood and children. The sequence with Vertov's wife and collaborator Elizaveta Svilova editing the film itself, showing her snipping and cataloguing film strips and exposing the construction of a film, features many stills of children and infants. These comparative intervals of motion distinguish the captured reality of imagined continuous motion from the still images constructing the motion, demonstrating the labor of the film worker. Given that this entire film and this editing section in particular is a document for the audience in how to form an interval-based effect in the viewer, and it is sensible that children, a classic symbol of hope and the future, would be presented in the base example of how to make meaning in a sequence through montage. One particular segment of the sequence exemplifying this shows interval-constructed interactions of movement between shots, between Svilova editing film strips and the material of the film itself as well as between still images and moving shots: of a laughing boy, the boy standing next to him, an old woman, and a part of a city shot from above. Like the entire sequence, it is instructive: we see a static filmstrip, then the continuous perceived motion the filmstrip creates. The second image of a child in this section, the boy standing next to the other one, is given this same treatment, showing the filmstrip, then a moving clip to make it clear that the moving clips are composed of images in order along a filmstrip. The next two images, the old woman and the people in the city, are still until the clip of the boy moving plays again —

then they move. Notable, given the earlier assertion that using children in this sequence lends authority to either accepted power as social symbol, that it's the moving image of a boy that then



leads to the old woman and the social body at large to begin moving: it's not as simple as saying that children are the harbingers of filmic future, giving life back to still images, but considering the shot-to-shot interval consideration of Vertov's montage, it's interesting that it is the moving image of a child that precedes the old woman and then the people from above. The film is constantly addressing film itself, as Petric writes, justifying interpretations of individual intervals as instructive to meaning making overall:

"In this context, the *Man with the Movie Camera* can be regarded as a self-referential structure which comments the nature of the cinematic medium, as well as the act of

building a film from the ‘bricks,’ which are ‘life facts’ selected and captured in reality, and later put together as ‘film-facts’ in order to form a complete ‘film-thing.’(Petric 34)

Film, arguably, is thus being demonstrated through the arranging of “bricks” into intervals to capture the social body in all stages of the life cycle in this sequence: the beginning, the end, and all the business in between.

In *A Sixth Part of the World*, children are included in the roll call for unity between all peoples, both in shots for different ethnicities and specific addresses to children and infants, encouraging youth participation in the political destiny of the Soviet Union regardless of ethnic background. However, while this may fit with the Soviet nation-building agenda, the push of non-Russian civic participation arguably exists along a spectrum including assimilation. Despite some preservation of individual identity, the sequence of *A Sixth Part of the World* with Samoyed children listening to Lenin on the gramophone veers on paternalistic as the good word is spread. As we’ve seen in other sequences, some elements are kept consistent to establish a shared filmic reality (in this case, angle, shot scale, shooting speed and the balance of light and dark), and others are altered to stir effect in the viewer. Movement and shot length, this time the camera itself in a longer pan shot of the children in contrast to the sequence’s other quick static images, place prominence on the faces of the children as they hear Lenin’s voice, showing the viewer the moment of them being welcomed into the fold from a young age. Whether this is a celebration of assimilation or solidarity constructed through the interval depends on how generous a viewing is given in regards to Vertov’s treatment of other cultures.



The old world walking in the new: depictions of old age

In comparison to frequently employed images of youth, depictions of advanced age are noticeably absent in comparison to those of children or healthy, working adults in his documents of life as it is. The general Soviet context was complicated, as the First World War (providing the context for the Russian Revolution) "...led to an erosion of adult authority across Europe," meaning those who would be up to a decade older as Vertov made these films would exist in dialogue with that general shift — the generation that Lenin referred to as taking part in overthrowing the old system but not able to see the communist society they (or, at least, some of them) acted in order to bring about (Neumann 275, 279).

Given *Kino Eye*'s emphasis on youth and its association with political progress, old age is either shown as remnants of the former world, as seen as old women as part of the crowd of drunk villagers dancing, or as followers of progress who see the Young Pioneers' posters and receive the message positively. One representation seeming to combine these is that of the Chinese magician Chang-gi-Wan, performing tricks for a crowd of children. A sense of distance between the magician and the children — identified signs of progress — watching him is created in the sequence through the interval. Consistent light and dark and shooting speeds establish the magician and the children in the same space, but discrepancies in movement and shot scales reinforce the distance. The magician's active performance is enhanced by the children standing

in place watching, and the closeups on the children watching but *not* on the man performing — save for the occasional close up of a hand, but this centers the act rather than the actor — form a dynamic in the scene informative of power imbalances between the two sides of the interaction.



The gaze is still othering as the children regard the magician with awe, but he is still a part of the larger communist world depicted in the film as he receives his pay in bread that we then see the process of. Perhaps a throughline can be drawn as the bread's process is shown to the viewer with some of Vertov's tricks, a kind of cinematic “magic” of the new in comparison to the old given more political utility and direct relation, shrinking the distance between performing and observing a trick. But, in this interval-constructed segment, the magic is in the sense of dissonance between the two sides of the scenario despite their physical proximity. After all, the generational unity of the ideal, imagined Soviet world would welcome the past while working toward the future in the present.

Representations of old age in *Man with a Movie Camera* typically come in the context of the human life cycle in Soviet society at large, constructed via interval to be associated with the

end of the process. This makes sense given the film's self-referential nature, where an image with a strong association, such as old age and endings, is both actually used and used as an example of how to arrange footage in sequence to generate meaning. The wedding and divorce sequence in the film is followed by a shot of a woman grieving, a shot back in the divorce filing office with a woman signing and covering her face, and then a shot of a very old woman grieving at a different site. Though this is brief, the lack of older people in much of Vertov's work makes the distinct inclusions more worthy of closer analysis. The association of divorce with death and grief is reinforced through the Vertovian interval, with consistent shooting speeds and shot scales forming a sense of a cohesive end as well as a similar movement — a woman leaned over (either in mourning or over a desk) while she does something with her hand close to her face (covering it, in the first two, or just having a similar placement in the third) — but slightly shifting angles from shot to shot to show these are different slices of the same part of the end phase, like differently angled facets of a gem.



Despite one shot of an old man the humorously translated intertitle identifies for us as a "lusty centenarian," there are not many substantial representations of old age in *A Sixth Part of the World*, outside of — similar to the treatment of youth in the film — being included in the unified "You" the film's lyrical intertitles addresses. A lack of this meaningful inclusion is still notable: two explanations I'd like to propose would be that it was simply more thematically relevant for Vertov to include more prominent, politically expedient symbols of the life cycle in

most of the film (youth or adult workers) instead of that of advanced age. A promotion of Soviet unity does not necessarily benefit from references to a pre-Soviet world: extended presence of the elderly could reasonably be interpreted in nonproductive ways for the assigned political task, as notions of backwardness transmute into criticism of those now being welcomed into the Soviet mosaic (recall the Chinese magician in *Kino-Eye* being paid in bread discussed earlier). The generational conflict is ideally abandoned in favor of class allegiance, but Vertov is incentivized to show differences for the sake of glorifying youth when relevant and not when the main effect is to espouse generational divisiveness. In her discussion of *A Sixth Part of the World*, Oksana Sarkisova said the film is a good example of the interval theory in its structure itself as well, in service of the promotion of “the unity of this mosaic world” — it’s a welcoming mosaic of peoples, but one consciously presented through appealing embodiments of youth and robust workers (Sarkisova 30).

Conclusion

This kind of analysis lends itself to imagining Vertov’s intention as he worked to organize his films in his lists and tables, juggling the intervals he constructed to help the viewer see what and how would help expand their vision in the creation of the perfect, new Soviet man. While some of the observations contained within this study may seem minute, discussing shifts in details and angles from frame to frame, the base, specific image-constructed theory of the interval justifies such an approach given the thorough construction of Vertov’s work. Approaching the work in this theory-first manner gives more recognition to Vertov as a theorist, as discussed earlier, as well as the series of expansions the interval theory underwent in application from perception to rhetorical structure.

This study has sought to center the theory of the interval as the vital organizing and conceptual tool in Vertov's work that it is, as well as highlight the merit of age as a useful area of study in Vertov's work due to its representational nature of society at large and universal understanding. Further relevant studies along this line of Vertov-as-theorist could focus on how Vertov balanced theoretical experiment with ideological expectation, the earlier suggested examination of representations of gender through the interval theory, contrasting Vertovian representations of infants and children and generational differences in the colonial gaze as seen in *A Sixth Part of the World*.

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