

Review on Historical Assessment and Perception of Dziga Vertov

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ABSTRACT

In 1920s, Soviet silent films enjoyed unprecedentedly great prosperity throughout world film history. Particularly, Dziga Vertov could develop 'montage' in collaboration with Sergei Eisenstein and thereby could work as the engines behind development and leap of Soviet films toward 'new concepts' of 'new films' worldwide. However, Vertov's original reputations - the best film theorist and avant-gardist as well as great cineaste in his contemporary age - have been misunderstood or underestimated, so that he has been still misestimated or distorted as radical formalist and documentary propagandist. In regard to these points, this study aims to take Gilles Deleuze's modal esthetic approaches to further considering and historically re-highlighting D. Vertov's film theories that are based on the principle of 'film-reality' and the concept of 'Life As It Is' according to 'kino-eye' method and 'interval' theory as a part of futurism and constructivism breaking down any attribute of traditional narrative films.

Keywords: Dziga Vertov, Montage, Kino-Eye, Interval, Constructivism.

1. INTRODUCTION

Historically, it is known that the Soviet films appeared with socialistic revolution of the Soviet Union. And the Bolshevik socialistic revolution in 1917 had significantly revolutionized cultural and art aspects as well as political and economic aspects, so that the Soviet Union could enjoy unprecedentedly great prosperity throughout world film history. In addition, the film was adopted as a part of Soviet Union's major national projects at a bound and was also fostered under the governmental support on a large scale, so that a variety of films could be experimentally created and produced, which ultimately contributed to marking a quantum leap forward, whether theoretically or quantitatively, to the extent of the golden age of silent films. Here, it is important to note that Sergei Eisenstein, Alexander Dovzhenko and Dziga Vertov stand for major contributors to such a remarkable development of Soviet films.[1] However, it is undeniable that Dziga Vertov has been often misunderstood or underestimated due to much fewer reviews and studies on his achievements than other two contemporary film pioneers, although he is known to play a great and influential role along with Sergei Eisenstein in the advent and development of the Soviet films. Vertov was the best film theorist recognized by his contemporaries, and was also the first man who made documentary film which was a new category of film that nobody could not dare to do so before.

Moreover, he was a film activist who contributed and went significantly to building a new society of socialism on the fullest conviction and ideology. Nevertheless, his reputations as great cineaste and film theorist have faded in history by way of Stalin's regime and political dark ages, so that he has been often underestimated simply as 'radical formalist' and 'documentary propagandist'. As Vlada Petric points out, he was a prime mover, pioneer and victim of his contemporary era.[2] Of course, he was also an avant-garde artist who accepted film as the most powerful means to communicate and express something with/to others. Of course, there are some reasonable grounds for such underestimation: Contrary to popular fiction films pioneered by Sergei Eisenstein, Vertov's film theories focused on dealing with a new genre called 'documentary' to explore film itself in excessively difficult, experimental and formalistic ways. Besides, Vertov's films and purposes have been criticized for their lack of purity in cinematographic art, because they were closely associated with his contemporary socialistic realities and the ideology of Communism. And his films were often overlooked in the capitalistic camp and English speaking countries because of an unbridgeable gap between these two sides. That is why conventional film world has considered Vertov as documentarian, while documentary world has treated his films as a sort of fiction which he thought as the heart and essence of his films. Thus, such a gap created a dead angle and a loophole in studies on Vertov's film theories. The film theories of Vertov who acted as cineaste in his short lifetime have been often incompletely transmitted to this generation due to confusion with those of Sergei Eisenstein, V. I.

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Pudovkin, etc who were the original creators of montage in their contemporary era. Even recently, Vertov's film theories have been not yet fully propagated or communicated to other countries. As a result, Vertov has been classified as minor cineaste and has been also openly ignored and exposed to hostile criticisms because he dealt primarily with 'cinematic experiments' and 'documentary', so that he has been sealed and covered in film history over 4 decades.

In this regard, it is required to make a little more formulated and analytic study or investigation into Vertov's film theories and film works. Based on such requirement, this study aims to make a further analysis and take insights primarily into two key film theories of Vertov, i.e. kino-eye theory and interval theory.

2. KINO-EYE THEORY

The ideological and artistic foundation of Vertov's film theories were built on futurism, suprematism and Marxism which are three major influencers on the ideological trends of European art and literature just after 1910's. Futurism refers to an ideological trend that rejects traditional esthetic view of art, but adores various mechanisms of technology and machinery utilized as a means and prime mover to develop modern and urban capitalism, focusing primarily on artistic techniques in dynamics of such mechanisms. Suprematism refers to art for art in pursuit of pure art. It knocked into the Russian Revolution and evolved into constructivism, a pictorial and sculptural art movement. Suprematism pursues real 'formation' and 'embodiment' by means of pure form compositions and geometric abstraction, rather than reproduction or depiction. It focuses on functionality as well as mechanical and dynamic expression to associate 'art' with 'society.' It seeks to find out any principle of art through objective and scientific rules, rather than intuition and subjective judgment. Thus, Suprematism conceptualizes that art "art is a means to realize perception about space of world" and "artists make up their art works as an engineer builds up a bridge or a mathematician invents formulas of the orbits." In other words, artists play their roles as 'engineer' in making 'useful objects' as factory workers do.[2]

From this point of view, Vertov emphasized that filmmakers and cineaste should play 'new roles' in making 'new films' beyond conventional out-of-date practices (of 'art film' in his contemporary era) to keep up with Russian Revolution for building new socialism. So neither story nor narrative may be allowed in film, let alone scenario-based mimetic performance and dramaturgic behaviors at indoor stage. As a result, traditional literary and dramatic aspects become excluded from film even without any fictional nature.[3] Instead, Vertov adopted documentary film in newsreel format of on-site topics to communicate and inform knowledge about life and world in pursuit of fact and reality, so that he could seek to achieve both human development and social construction and implement and

maximize independent specialty and functionality of film as a media.



Fig. 1. kino eye (kinoglaz)

Silent film is a sort of visual media. The eye of film or movie camera can visualize anything invisible beyond the narrow visual field of human natural eyes. Accordingly, film has its duty to extend and maximize such visualization ability of camera. "Up to now, we have violated the right of film and camera. And we have forced film and camera to copy works of our eyes. So the better imitation has meant the better shot. But now, we have to set the camera free to make it work in the exact opposite direction beyond simple imitation." Here, Vertov notes two characteristics of perception based on camera: One is the extension of visual field through scientific use of camera as if to present different appearances of world beyond the limit of human natural perception, as shown in microscope and telescope. It doesn't mean simple quantitative extension, but it indicates that human eyes use cognitive mechanisms to complement and correct what is perceived, whereas mechanical eye can perceive things without such distortion or correction. The other refers to camera's perception that is free from restraint of human body. Beyond any physical position of human, the focus of camera can have a sort of autonomy or discretion and give unlimited possibility to change point of time. Based on these characteristics, film can "make sensuous exploration of world. Supposing that extended perception of visual world and acquired autonomy of camera eye are something new and power of film media, Vertov defines the method of kino-eye as follows.[4]

Kino-eye is a scientific method to explore visual world by systematically recording facts of life on film and systematically organizing documentary materials recorded on film.

According to Vertov's definition, kino-eye doesn't mean a purpose itself, but only a method. He explains that the purpose of kino-eye lies in film-truth (kino-pravda). "Kino-eye means visualizing something invisible beyond any limit of time and space, clarifying something ambiguous, revealing something covered and correctly elucidating something disguised so as to help the audience get right perception and turn from falsehood to

truth.” Vertov calls it ‘film-fact’. However, film-fact itself is not the truth or reality he pursues. Like other montage theorists, he sought to implement film-fact by means of montage. Therefore, truth or reality is a concept that should be more differentiated than we understand usually. Vertov makes clear that the performance of kino-eye doesn’t mean simple record of fragments or pieces comprising reality and facts. The most consequential point in the nature of film is to make scientific use of film camera and thereby find out any principle that continuously defines human society and history behind our daily realities. Vertov believed that the discovery of such principles could change human perceptions. In other words, he estimated that cinematographic mechanisms (e.g. montage, change of shot rate, split screen, stop action, slow motion, freeze-frame, etc), not simple record, could have significant effects on the perceptions of the public. As to such potential effects, Vertov suggests ‘the communist decoding of the world.’ That is, he advises that reality should be decoded through cinematic mechanisms, not simply recorded on film.

The key points of Vertov’s kino-eye can be outlined as follows.[5]

a. The “unarmed” human eye (the eye without the aid of the cameraman) is incapable of orienting itself in the “visual chaos of life,” it must be assisted by “Film-Eye,” which forms a symbiosis between the human eye and the camera objective.

b. The cameraman does not possess any supernatural power; he is “an ordinary man” who knows how to use a mechanical tool which helps him “veer” in the “boisterous ocean of life.”

c. The cameraman should avoid shooting “life facts” with a stationary camera, instead, he must be ready to move through reality as if in “a canoe lost in a stormy sea”; this contributes greater kinesthetic impact to the “film-thing” projected on the screen.

d. The cameraman does not need a “pre-written scheme” (a script), nor has he to follow any preconceived idea about life; he does not attune himself to the “director’s instructions,” and the “schedule made up by a scripter”; he has his own view of life and person vision of the future film.

e. “Speed” and “dexterity” are the most important skills of the cameraman’s profession; he must “keep up with the pace of life’s events,” in order to maintain the genuine rhythm of the events shown on the screen as a “film-thing.”

f. The cameraman uses many specific cinematic devices to “attack” reality with his camera and to put facts together in a news structure; these devices help him to strive for a better world with more perceptive people.

g. The cameraman should photograph persons with the intention of remaining “unnoticed”; he is expected not to bother people at their work just as he would expect them not to disturb him during shooting.

h. The cameraman must be everywhere and “observe” everything in order to obtain various choices before he decides when to shoot and what to face with his camera; only then will he be able to keep pace with everyday life.

I. Knowing that “in life nothing is accidental,” the cameraman is expected to grasp dialectical relationship between disparate events occurring in reality; his duty is to unveil the intrinsic conflict of life’s antagonistic forces and to lay bare “the cause and effect” of life’s phenomena.

j. At the same time, the cameraman is not an impartial observer of reality: he actively immerses himself in life’s struggle, and once a part of it, he realizes that in life “everything has its own reason,” which has to become manifest in the film.

k. The cameraman must always take the “progressive side” of life; he is expected to support and espouse the “revolutionary attitude” toward reality, which will contribute to building “a true socialist society.”

l. All this is necessary if *kinoks* want to show on the screen “life-as-it-is” in its essence, including the “life” of the film itself—the process of cinematic creation from shooting and laboratory, through editing, up to final product, i.e., the film being projected to the audience in the moving auditorium.[5]

Briefly speaking, the kino-eye is a concept that only empirical world perceived through phenomena alone is not enough to identify the substance of world. That is, it means that the nature of world can be discovered only with scientific analysis (dialectical materialism) on world as well as empirical understanding. Kino-eye is reorganizing film material (fact of life) into cinematic structure (film), i.e. a new unity that has a special ideological meaning. Here, recording “our life in reality as it is” without any beautification is in conflict with “having to take ideological attitudes.” However, Vertov maintained that these two assignments don’t exclude each other, because they reflect dialectical process of social evolution in the socialistic structure.

In addition, the method of kino-eye includes another principle of shooting strategy called “unperceptibly shot life.” Every filmmaker has to get interested in “reality” in every scene from the beginning of filmmaking process, and make sure that images on screen form objective expressions of an incident shot in reality to ‘preserve whole certainty of such being.’ That is why cameramen must observe reality objectively by looking at “place,” “moving characters or objects” and “theme,” and must approach and shoot them with stealthy steps even every second. This is a shooting strategy that no interruption is allowed even every second and camera may not be concealed from their eyes, although they express complaints about such a shooting itself (to target them).[5]

In addition, cameramen have to capture dialectical relationships among separate incidents that occur in our reality. His mission is to find out social conflicts as well as fundamental collision among hostile powers, and discover certain causality of phenomena in our daily life. To achieve the goal of mission, he has to keep taking revolutionary attitudes to reality in the progressive aspects all the time, contributing to building up socialistic society. All of these requirements are to demonstrate the essence of “Life As It Is” on the screen, which includes a “world” (life) of film itself - final production process involving shooting, laboratory and edition, that is, cinematic creation

process of film which is run off to the audience at movie theater.[6]

Summing up, it is found that kino-eye refers to all Vertov's film theories that make up what is all about film including shooting and edition, but not limited only to methods like shooting.

3. INTERVAL THEORY

Interval literally means a gap and also implies absence and retardation. Seemingly, Vertov's interval theory is not so much different from montage theory that can be simply understood, and looks somewhat inferior to Eisenstein's film theories. However, it is found that Vertov's interval theory incorporates a wealth of contents and meanings, when it is analyzed in connection with his critical minds.

He thinks that the matter of interval is a critical concern to the process of making film-object. "The organization (production) of film-object allows us to develop whatever the theme of a film may be - whether it is comic, tragic or else. It is entirely a matter of particular juxtaposition of visual details, i.e. a matter of interval." [7]

Therefore, there are 2 momentums within interval: One is visual details, while the other is particular juxtaposition. These two momentums can be outlined as follows:

First, visual details are concerned with a matter of shot. That is, it is a matter of shot composition and visualization. Vertov's constructivism has influences on shot visualization to encompass various elements such as the standstill and movement of images in a shot, the velocity and direction of such movement, the geometric arrangement of images in a shot, the angle of image capture, and more. However, the film-fact that he claims by rejecting either dramatic presentation or scenario contains extra aspects as well as such constructivist elements. This is consistent with his conviction about the ability of film to record facts, although the facts don't mean any reality we usually perceive on a natural or daily basis. The facts he mean indicate what is called 'the perception of a fact or a world of naked truth' which is not filtered through our daily dominant perception modes. This demonstrates a part of differences shown in dialectical comprehension between Vertov and Eisenstein. "Theoretical inconsistency between Vertov and Eisenstein generally comes from differences in 'ontological authenticity' of the cinema, i.e. different definitions of how much the audience may accept virtual incidents expressed on the screen as if they occurred actually in our real world." [8]

Here, a matter of acceptance about ontological authenticity is concerned with how much further a cinematic media may contain and reflect facts of our real world, not how much deeply the audience may be absorbed and interested in story of a film or may be assimilated with the virtual world of cinematic story. In other words, it is about the extent of 'image fidelity' that may make the audience feel the reality they usually experience while watching a

film. As to this matter, Eisenstein's viewpoints are in conflict with Vertov's ones. Contrary to common constructivists, Eisenstein didn't think that camera passes through our reality or reveals hidden meanings of our reality. But he thought that camera is just a means used by creative film director, and certain meanings on the screen cannot be communicated to the audience without stylization through detailed montage.[8]

That is, Eisenstein thought that a shot itself cannot communicate any shock, stimulus or new meaning to the audience at all. On the contrary, Vertov had a opposite viewpoint about shot: Interval, retardation and gap in a shot. As for Vertov, "a life doesn't disappear permanently or leave no trace while passing through camera lens, but leaves traces that are too correct and tough to follow." [6] Here, 'a tough trace to follow' means that a life is not entirely absorbed into the scenario intent or narrative. Thus, it literally signifies a trace that is not entirely organized just by montage. Because a shot has such an ontological authenticity, it is not incorporated into a routine, stereotyped and dominant order of perception, but is used as a material to afford constructivist abstract picture. For example, exceptional or unexpected actions - not any common-sense or conventional reaction - in certain situation or incident, or a picture of a person with closed eyes (as he closes his eyes momentarily when taking a picture of him at photo studio) demonstrates a projection of reality and an interval coming through intended formula. It is natural that there is such a chasm revealed in shot images in a film that has neither dramatic presentation nor scenario. In the light of original intention, this chasm is 'something meaningless' and 'something unnecessary' but it indicates 'reality' and 'what exists in reality'. Vertov thought that these chasms could capture hidden or potential meanings of our reality, as revealed by camera. Briefly speaking, the interval means a theoretical point that allows us to give possibility of reality capture to newsreel, which is not available from constructivists and is also overlooked even by Eisenstein.

Next, juxtaposition, the second component of interval, means montage as a connection between shots. As for Vertov, the montage means causing a collision in shot-to-shot connections by means of various factors such as frame setting, camera angle, sense of depth and graphic composition / brightness. Film shot itself is a series of separate frames, so it contains an interval between frames.[9] Likewise, montage is also a series of separate frames, so it contains an interval between shots. Therefore, film is a sort of montage and contains intervals. Incidentally, the interval produces certain effects and becomes also incorporated or absorbed into the context of narrative. But if it is not incorporated into an abundance of meaning production, it is the very existence of interval which Vertov explains. As a result, it works as a brake for the syntactic composition of narrative, as well demonstrated in <the Man with a Movie Camera>, a film directed by Vertov. Here, the interval is a sort of 'flicker effect' that aims to make the audience perceive desired effect of separation by inserting one or more black / white frames in between shots. Except for the above characteristic of montage composition, Vertov's interval theory is

not so much different from Eisenstein's intellectual montage. Strongest criticism for Vertov is found in a fact that Vertov's films are too different for the audience to understand, rather than theoretical criticisms for his films. In response to such criticisms, Vertov maintains that he chooses to just follow constructivist conviction and thereby express his cinematic languages. That is, he sought to understand what corresponds to unit and syntax of literal languages according to constructivist principle. In the light of this point, Vertov didn't think that images may be restored into language, but thought of cinematic languages independently of narrative substance in film itself on the basis of inherent syntactic nature of cinematic languages, rather than emphasized such a narrative substance of film. That is why Vertov expected that images would follow conviction of possible comprehension beyond the national boundaries and thereby would be available as a language for all the people worldwide, if the film evolves into dominant communication means equivalent to languages and people can have a good command of alphabet in film. Thus, he could defend his films from criticisms for their difficulty meanings, because he thought that his films would be much easier to understand than foreign languages.

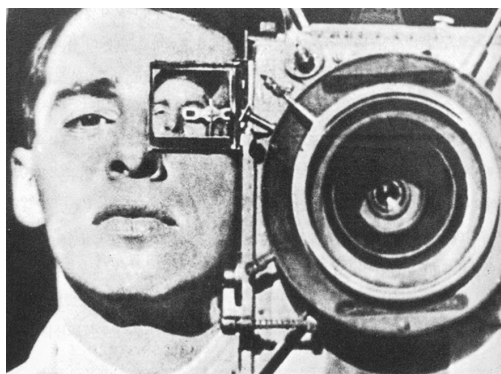


Fig. 2. Dziga Vertov's kino-pravda

4. CONCLUSION

The 1920's were the golden age of silent films and were also the time of various cinematic experiments. In addition, it was the age that there were a variety of ideologic trends and movements working at the same time. During this age, Dziga Vertov was the most creative, radical and theoretical film director, and used new languages to produce films without affirming conventional traditionality. Based on futurism and constructivism, his film theories can be characterized broadly by the principle of 'film-truth' and the concept of 'Life As It Is' through 'kino-eye' method and internal theory. Based on a conviction that a film equipped with such principle and concept can work as real international languages for expression and communication, Vertov was fully committed to documentary film, not fiction one. As a film producer or reformer who longs for a vision of ultimate unity between new form of arts and new society, Vertov believed that

such a combination may be realized through a truth tracked and captured by camera in our daily life. He introduced and left these ideas and concepts in many writings as well as silent or sound images. And he could implement them through his films such as <the Man with a Movie Camera>, <the Donbass Symphony (Passion)> and <the Three Songs about Lenin>. Contrary to Eisenstein and other many contemporary film producers who yielded to bureaucratic demands from the Communist Party, Vertov kept abiding firmly by experimental and untraditional concepts of documentary film till the end of his life. In stead of scenario, dramatic presentation and narrative, Vertov performed experiments with the 'existence and concept of possibility or potentiality', which are all ambiguous and cannot be discriminated (or separated) from each other, rather than immanence of images in a shot, that is, reality of images. By such experiments, he could make authentic realities (different from common external facts) revealed and could make 'a new film' that is called documentary. That is why Gilles Deleuze became an advocator of Vertov versus Eisenstein regarding dialectical theories about montage. Vertov's cinematic experiments and theories have significant influences on documentary movements including Cinema Verite as well as remarkable development of world filmdom. Moreover, there have been a series of researchers who want to inherit and continue his experimental spirit and films. However, their studies still remain so much unfledged at toddler step, since they are very marginal in comparison with Vertov's actual activities and achievements in his lifetime. Hence, it will be required for follow-up studies to adopt dialectic of oblivion and memory to restore and re-highlight Vertov from the coffin of history, because it is a duty of living descendants.

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