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# Dziga Vertov, The First Shoemaker of Russian Cinema<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

We are told that the mechanization of production has dire effects on the functionality of language as well as human capacities for symbolic communication in general. This expropriation of language by the machine results in the deterioration of the traditional political public sphere, which once privileged language as the exclusive medium of intersubjectivity and agency. The essay argues that the work of the Soviet media artist Dziga Vertov, especially his 1931 “film-thing” *Enthusiasm*, sought to redress the antagonism between technology and politics faced by modern industrial societies. Vertov’s public sphere was one that did not privilege language and abstract discourse, but that incorporated all manner of material objects as means of communication. As Vertov instructed, the public sphere must move beyond its linguistic bias to embrace industrial commodities as communicative social media.

1. This article is excerpted from a longer paper that examines Dziga Vertov’s work with television, but that cannot appear here in its entirety because of exigencies of space. Postponing the discussion of early television’s position within the Soviet media landscape for a later context, the present article limits itself to the exposition of two arguments: the first section addresses the fate of political discourse within modern regimes of industrial production; then, through an analysis of one passage from Vertov’s film *Enthusiasm* (1931), the second section considers Vertov’s strategies for forging new modes of political agency within the sphere of technical production.

Il'ia Erenburg's 1929 production novel about the life of the modern automobile titled *10 л.с.* (*10 hp*, or *10 Horsepower*) opens in France in 1799, long before the appearance of the automobile itself. To establish the genealogy of the automobile, that consumer durable that decidedly embodies such values of modernity as speed, mobility, and independence, Erenburg takes the reader back to the French Revolution, or more precisely, to the wake of the French Revolution, which, at the moment the novel begins, has already passed through the phases of the Terror and the Thermidorian Reaction. The year in which the internal combustion engine was invented, the republican year VIII, would also be the year of Napoleon Bonaparte's coup d'état.

The opening scene finds the engineer Philippe LeBon withdrawn from public life, installed in his candlelit workroom among a congeries of papers, bottles, blueprints, and designs. Having grown weary of the endless revolutionary turmoil, LeBon has given himself over wholly to work on his latest invention, the gasoline engine. Although it once promised social progress, the political revolution no longer interests LeBon, because the "revolution," true to its etymological duplicity, has ceased to move forward and now instead simply revolves in place. In his study, LeBon works among shadows and silhouettes that are far away from the pseudo-revolutionary convulsions of the outside world. Not incidentally, as we will see, the description of the projected light and cast shadows in LeBon's tenebrous study ("In the flickering candlelight can be seen a bizarre shadow on the wall . . .") recalls both the allegorical order of Plato's cave as well as a theater in which a film is being viewed. It is in this setting that the "young dreamer" LeBon, a technological utopianist in the vein of his contemporary Charles Fourier, will design the combustion engine as a substitute for the political transformations that were the promise of the revolution ten years before. When LeBon shows his schematics to a Jacobin friend who has come to inform him that Bonaparte has landed at Toulon, the Jacobin briefly considers the designs, but then demands: "And what of the revolution?" To which LeBon replies: "Yes, it was the revolution that instilled in me a desire for universal well-being and a new concern [забота]. The soul of the revolution is here: in these drawings."<sup>2</sup> If 1799, the year of Bonaparte's coup, marked the definitive termination of the French Revolution, the invention of the gasoline engine the same year made possible the continuation of this revolution by other means.

2. Il'ia Erenburg, *10 л.с.* (Berlin: Petropolis, 1929), p. 13. Henceforth abbreviated it text as *10 hp*.

The migration of the political into the technological constitutes the central problematic of Erenburg's novel. Born of a displaced revolutionary impulse, the automobile and its fortunes become for Erenburg the perfect case through which to explore the full ambivalence of a development that emerged during the Soviet writer's own Thermidor: namely, what the dismayed Bolshevik Asja Lacis observed in 1927 to be the "conversion of revolutionary effort into technological effort."<sup>3</sup> After 1799, the book leaps forward a century to the fin-de-siècle, then to Henry Ford, and finally to André Citroën, whose factory plant inverts utterly LeBon's ideals for a technological utopia. *10 hp's* scene in the Citroën factory, which Erenburg titles "What Is a Conveyer Belt?" (Что такое лента?), depicts the locus classicus of alienated labor already familiar from other production novels: organized in neat, serried columns, the workers repeat again and again the same minimal gesture of screwing or bolting without any comprehension of the final product, with no image of the totality of their labor: "Long rows of workers. One screws the nuts on, another fastens them, the third rivets the mudguards, the fourth lacquers the rims, the fifth fashions the axles. One raises his hand and then puts it down again. He is given exactly 40 seconds for this small dowel. The machine races along. There's nothing to discuss with the machine."<sup>4</sup>

Within Erenburg's otherwise clichéd depiction of assembly-line labor, this last sentence stands out. Indeed, the absence of dialogue is one of the most notable features of Erenburg's depiction of work at the Citroën plant. Repeatedly, Erenburg contrasts the clamor of the machines with the silence of the workers, who listen only to the voices of the tools, each of which speaks in a different machinic tongue.<sup>5</sup> But the speechlessness of the workers is not simply a response to the deafening din of the factory, for the workers remain silent even after they have left the workplace. At home also, in their everyday lives, they have nothing to say: "They don't speak to one another. Gradually they forget human words, words that are warm and rough like sheep's wool or like clods of freshly ploughed earth."<sup>6</sup> Eventually, the muteness acquired at the factory proliferates to

3. Cited in Walter Benjamin, "Moscow Diary," *October* 35 (1985): 4–135, quote on p. 82.

4. Erenburg, *10 l.s.* (above, n. 2), p. 26.

5. There is today a postindustrial variant of this practice: corporations such as Exxon and Mobil use white-noise machines in their open-plan offices to mask voices and inhibit conversations and thus increase productivity among their white-collar employees.

6. Erenburg, *10 l.s.* (above, n. 2), p. 30.

envelop all aspects of the worker's life: "It seems that [the worker] has unlearned how to speak."<sup>7</sup>

Behind the conversion of political revolution into technological production—the historical trajectory from Danton to Citroën via LeBon—Erenburg discerns a qualitative existential transformation: the muting of human consciousness on a mass scale. Here, Erenburg profiles territory that will be explored in greater detail by Hannah Arendt in her 1958 study of modernization and alienation, *The Human Condition*. In this book, Arendt explains that the second industrial revolution and mass consumer society have irreversibly changed the parameters of social existence by replacing the political category of "action" with the technological category of "making." Having first emerged in the ancient Greek *polis*, the spheres of political action and publicness originally had their basis in symbolic thought, sociality, and intersubjectivity; within these general conditions of plural existence, political man was constituted as a rational, discursive being through his use of speech. But with the automation of production and the administered "massification" of existence, Arendt writes, the labor of the body comes to eclipse discursive action. The contraction of the political public sphere reduces the human to a biological organism, a technical assemblage of purely creaturely components that is determined exclusively by natural, metabolic cycles. Just as mechanization has converted the horse into the purely notional abstraction we know as "horsepower," so too does mechanization reduce human beings to those primitive capacities of the organism that can be delivered over to a system of universal exchange and relative value. Technical making extracts from the human only what it can calculate and put into circulation and then leaves behind a mute zoological remainder: bare life, or, to use a more recent idiom, *Homo sacer*. Once a political and public creature, man is now, Arendt portends, "on the verge of developing into an animal species."<sup>8</sup>

Symptomatic of the atrophy of political-discursive action and the concomitant animalization of the laboring subject, Arendt explains, is a loss of language. In a commentary on Arendt's book, the sociologist Oskar Negt confirms that modern methods of division and capitalization have made humans into "isolated living beings that

7. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

8. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 322. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt elaborated in labor-theoretical terms the discussion of "naked life" from her *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), where she first posited the distinction between political existence and biological life.

use their tools, equipment and instruments inside of windowless monads, so to speak, without needing other humans to use them successfully."<sup>9</sup> By compounding the distance introduced by the basic division of labor, capital's twin strategies of expropriation and accumulation create ever greater intervals between human subjects. The rationalization of production reduces the sphere of the political and of public discourse by transforming work into what Marx called "*Arbeit sans phrase*"—an expression rendered in English as "labor pure and simple," but literally meaning "phraseless labor." It is labor that is orchestrated, Negt suggests, as "a monologue that is speechless and non-communicable."<sup>10</sup>

The correlation between the advent of modern regimes of mechanized labor and the deterioration of the capacity for discursive intersubjectivity was corroborated empirically by the research of the French psychiatrist Bernard Doray, who summarized his work with assembly-line laborers in the 1970s in *From Taylorism to Fordism: A Rational Madness*. Because of the abstract character of factory labor, Doray explained, the wage-earner exists in a pure present. The Taylor system's mechanisms for fragmenting labor-power institute a fundamental distinction between *having*, which grounds psychic experience within the symbolic register, and *being*, by which Doray understands "a dimension of identity which can be neither totally symbolized nor totally socialized."<sup>11</sup> The reduction of symbolic life to pure being, which repeats Arendt's shift from "political man" to "animal species," is the experiential corollary to capital's processes of expropriation: the worker *has* nothing—she only *is*. Doray's analysis demonstrates that depriving the work-gestures and -movements of their capacity to endure in time creates a state of extreme mental dissociation in the subject. A gesture acquires intersubjective, symbolic meaning only by virtue of the durational quality that Doray calls the "trace" of living activity; without this trace, the gestures of the workers have no expressive or representational value:

Traces are appropriated, and gestures become divorced from the objects they leave behind. Traces of labour obviously belong to a dimension that can be symbolized; they indicate the moment of the objectification of activity, the moment when an object that has been produced can take on a meaning within a system of representations that exist outside it.

9. Oskar Negt, *Lebendige Arbeit, Enteignete Zeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 1984), p. 171.

10. *Ibid.*

11. Bernard Doray, *From Taylorism to Fordism: A Rational Madness*, trans. David Macey (London: Free Association, 1988), p. 122.

This dispossession is not simply economic; it is also technical, cultural and political, and it involves a loss of subjective existence. Ultimately, activities appear to have a purely operational meaning. Productive operations are, so to speak, “hyper-concrete” and are introverted. They are so bound up with the immediacy and singularity of physical movements . . . that in some cases workers find it impossible to describe what they do without resorting to mime.<sup>12</sup>

Systems of scientific management expropriate the representational trace, Doray explains. Through this expropriation, the assembly line substitutes for the symbolic gestuary an “introverted,” purely solipsistic pattern of abstract movements that have no communicative value. The psychopathology of Taylorist labor sans phrase results, as Erenburg showed already in 1929, in the unlearning of language, as well as the worker’s neutralization as a political—that is, public and discursive—subject. We are reminded of Theodor Adorno’s conclusion from his 1951 *Minima Moralia*, “the present form of the collective is in itself speechless.”<sup>13</sup>

Doray’s analysis reminds us that the societal means of production are always also cultural systems of representation. As scholars from the developmental psychologist Lev Vygotsky to the paleoanthropologist André Leroi-Gourhan have demonstrated, human labor and speech share the same point of origin. And since production and signification continue to determine each other even at the most advanced stages of psychological development (*ontogenesis*) and cultural evolution (*phylogenesis*), one can conclude that transformations in the technical-productive field would necessarily occasion a corresponding shift, *mutatis mutandis*, in the protocols of language and communication. Within the Taylorist system, in particular, the laborer is reduced to “hyper-concrete” labor sans phrase, and thus deprived not only of the final product of her work, the commodity, but also of a system of representation that is adequate to her productive activities.

While Doray quite clearly laments this loss of language, the responses of his research subjects would nonetheless imply, contrary to Doray’s elegiac tone, that the capacity for communication persists, albeit in an expressive zone located beyond speech. For example, in response to Doray’s request for a description of work at the factory, one of his subjects, a transistor assembly worker, exclaims: “Oh my God! How can I explain what I do? *I’d have to act it out.*”<sup>14</sup>

12. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

13. Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: New Left Books, 1974), p. 220.

14. Doray, *From Taylorism to Fordism* (above, n. 11), p. 171n4 (emphasis added).

In these interviews, it seems that Doray would be better off filming his subjects, rather than transcribing their words. The modern worker may not be a subject of language, in other words, but she *would be* a subject of film. Formulating this claim more axiomatically, we could say that Doray's observation that some workers *re-sort to mime* to describe their activities on the assembly line reveal a structural consonance between mechanized labor and the cinematic apparatus. Doray's subjects "work" best on the silent screen. The same homology between film and assembly-line labor also informs Erenburg's *10 hp*, whose title for the chapter in the Citroën factory pivots on a felicitous lexical coincidence in Russian: "Что такое лента?" can mean either "What is a conveyor belt?" or "What is a film?" Not insignificantly, Erenburg's first description of LeBon, amidst flickering light and projected shadows, explicitly casts the inventor of the internal combustion engine in the role of a movie spectator. One need only recall the slapstick scenes of Taylorized labor in Charlie Chaplin's superlative *Modern Times* to be convinced of the adequacy of film (лента) for expressing the experience of the conveyor belt (лента).

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It is the work of the Soviet documentarian Dziga Vertov that takes us beyond a long-established conception of the political as something coextensive with the faculty of language itself ("political consciousness is perhaps nonexistent outside of the *logos*," writes Roland Barthes<sup>15</sup>), and relocates the site of political activity and agency instead within modern processes of technical making. For Vertov, politics emerges out of matter rather than discourse. Herein lies the essential difference between Vertov's films and those of his great contemporary Sergei Eisenstein, whose practice, as is well-known, was motivated by an interest in the semiotic and linguistic dimensions of cinema.<sup>16</sup> Vertov's communist civic sphere was built of things, not language. His film *Enthusiasm: Symphony of the Donbass* (1931), in particular, explores the expressive capacities of these realms beyond language. Made just one year after the publication of Erenburg's *10 hp*, Vertov's first sound film forces the human voice to compete and interact with all manner of industrial noise and asymbolic incident.

15. Roland Barthes, "The Photographic Message" (1961), in *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 19.

16. See, for example, Christian Metz's discussion of Eisenstein in *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, trans. Michael Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

And by dismantling the *cordon sanitaire* separating language from noise, this *kino-veshch'*, or “film-thing,” diagrams new modalities of social agency within modern regimes of production that, as Arendt demonstrated, had neutralized the classical public sphere and transformed the conditions of collective existence.

In the center of the second segment of this filmic triptych is a sequence that constitutes, slight as the plot is, the narrative “peripeteia” of the film: as the factory whistle slowly modulates between two pitches, the screen shows machinery at a standstill and the coal trolleys empty; at the same time that production hovers in abeyance, a theater audience sits attentively while a coal miner speaks, but his words are masked by the drone of the whistle; then the incessant hum of the whistle is breached by gaps of silence that transform the noise into discrete Morse code, spelling out “все на фронт пятилетки” (Everyone [go] to the front of the five-year plan); at this moment, the Ukrainian word *проти* blazons across the screen in front of the audience, naming the “shortfall” in coal production; the hum of the factory whistle begins once again to shift between two pitch events, only to be overlaid now by the sharp pulses of a radiotelegraph that spells out, again in Morse, “даешь уголь” (give coal); the coal miner is shown speaking on the screen once more, and again his voice is masked, this time by the radiotelegraph; finally, in response to the stentorian radio-announcer who enjoins “вернем стране угольный долг” (we will pay the country back what it is owed in coal), the audience rises to sing the Internationale. After this sequence, shock workers flood the Ukrainian Donbass region and restore coal production.

*Enthusiasm's* muted worker whose mouth moves without emitting words offers a perfect illustration of Erenburg's assembly-line sans phrase from two years before. But at the same time that *Enthusiasm* eclipses human language with factory noise, it also reveals the communicative potential of industrial machinery. Violating what Vertov called the artificial “division of films according to the categories of talking, noise, or sound [разговорные, шумовые, или звуковые],”<sup>17</sup> *Enthusiasm* presents a variety of machine discourse and syntax, from the radiotelegraph and the intervallic Morse signals to the factory whistle that is manipulated by Vertov to sound distinct musical notes.<sup>18</sup> The human voice is but one instrument of communication

17. Dziga Vertov, *Iz naslediia, tom II: Stat'i i vystupleniia* (Moscow: Eisenstein tsentr, 2008), p. 198 (hereafter *Iz naslediia II*).

18. Through postproduction manipulation of the sound recording, Vertov was able to make a factory whistle sound the notes G, B, and C. See Oksana Bulgakowa, “The Ear Against the Eye: Vertov's Symphony,” *Monatshefte* 98:2 (2006): 219–239, esp. p. 222.



in the contemporary industrial landscape. For this reason, Vertov claimed that the film, which was assembled from live recordings of Donbass industry made in 1930, “dramatically expands our aural horizon.”<sup>19</sup> Transcripts from two different talks given by Vertov, probably at German screenings of the film during the second half of 1931, suggest that there was an earlier version of the film that was even more experimental and that made even more extensive use of radiotelegraphic code and “translating machines.”<sup>20</sup> Although it was received abroad with great fanfare by members of the avant-garde such as Hans Eisler, Egon Erwin Kisch, László Moholy-Nagy, and Charlie Chaplin, *Enthusiasm* was rejected domestically as incomprehensible and hermetic. John MacKay has documented in his indispensable essay on the film that most of the addled Russian spectators dismissed the film as sheer cacophony, as so many “inhuman noises.”<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the soundtrack of the film, hailed today as one of the first examples of *musique concrète*, hardly constitutes easy listening. Here, the marginalized human voice must compete with all other varieties of sound within a richly stratified acoustic environment that layers swathes of droning noise with rhythmic clacking and the ticking of a clock, and that punctuates this vast soundscape with sharp signals like the piercing report of a forge hammer or the tone of a workshop bell.

19. Vertov, *Iz naslediia II* (above, n. 17), p. 230.

20. In these talks, Vertov describes a film that differs in critical aspects from the version that was restored by Peter Kubelka in 1972. The ending, in particular, suggests a burgeoning of signals and codes: “radiotelegraphic codes flit about in the glow. Socialist whistles sound and dart into the future. The night is shot through with the fireworks of dazzling sparks of steel. One after another suns arise from the Bessemer furnaces and the sounds of the factory workbenches merge with the sounds of the Internationale—specialized machines calculate the enthusiasm of the Donbass workers, converted into numbers” (ibid., p. 229 [emphasis in original]).

21. John MacKay, “Disorganized Noise: *Enthusiasm* and the Ear of the Collective,” n.d., pt. 3, p. 4. <http://www.kinokultura.com/articles/enthusiasm-eye.pdf>.

22. As early as 1925, Vertov suggested that he was transitioning from his previous work with film to his future work with television—two moments that he identified, respectively, as *Kino-Eye* and *Radio-Eye* (see “Radio-glaz” [1925], in *Iz naslediia II* [above, n. 17], pp. 97–100). As the decade continued, the theory of *Radio-Eye* came to occupy an increasingly central role in Vertov’s practice, eventually replacing *Kino-Eye* completely. Although Vertov would insist repeatedly that a number of his most significant works, such as *The Eleventh Year* (1928) and *Man With a Movie Camera* (1929) were conceived not as films, but as television broadcasts, contemporary scholarship on Vertov has neglected his preoccupation with early television, choosing instead to approach Vertov as a filmmaker. *The Eleventh Year* and *Man With a Movie Camera* may have ultimately been realized on celluloid, but their conception and structure suggested experiments that

The short segment under consideration, which depicts an early version of television,<sup>22</sup> provides a concise lesson in the problem of how meaning is constituted. While the radiotelegraphed word *прорыв* indicates, on the film's diegetic register, the shortfall in coal production, its appearance on the screen coincides with the moment at which intervals of silence begin to perforate the drone of the whistle, thus evoking the literal meaning of the word *прорыв*: "breach" (fig. 1). The moment at which communication begins, and the moment at which production resumes, is experienced by the auditor through the rupturing of the sonic envelope. As Vertov reveals in this segment, discursive communication is structured as an essentially *subtractive* procedure: surrounded by an unregulated, phraseless plenitude of external stimuli, the mind reduces these myriad stimuli to a limited number of signals and thereby creates out of this chaos an organized semantic field. This moment of subtraction, which is also that of cognitive *abstraction*, marks the boundary between the external world and human consciousness.

The basic mechanism of this dialectic between nature and consciousness was formulated in media-theoretical terms in Barthes's 1961 essay "The Photographic Message," in which he famously contrasted cultural discourse to "photographic non-signification." Like all analog recording technologies, the photograph, a "message without a code," participates in the ceaseless murmur of nature.<sup>23</sup> As an "agglutination of symbols," an analog inscription like the photograph becomes legible when connotative procedures (captioning, posing, montage, and so on) breach the "perfection and plenitude of its analogy" and transform the natural emission into a cultural artifact.<sup>24</sup> By breaking apart the natural, analogical stream and making possible its arrangement into discrete phrases, discourse—in all of its manifestations, from human speech to computer code—fashions out of the continuous flux of existence a meaningful, *discontinuous* syntax with a stable semantic structure. Consciousness and culture come into being, in other words, not through the production of information, but through its withholding. They are enabled subtractively, through the intrusion of silence (*прорыв*). Hence Vertov,

were, by Vertov's account, of a fundamentally televisual nature. The second half of the present essay expands the reading of this sequence from *Enthusiasm* in order to investigate how this early apparition of television calls into question familiar notions of representational space, and with them, certain foundational presuppositions of mimetic naturalism.

23. Barthes, "Photographic Message" (above, n. 15), p. 5.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 7.



Figure 1. Dziga Vertov, *Enthusiasm: Symphony of the Donbass* (1931).

who defined kino-eye as the “decoding of life” (расшифровка жизни), based his documentary method upon the use of intervals, or gaps: “*intervals* (the transitions from one movement to another) assert themselves as the constructive material of a film-thing, while the movements themselves are in no way the constructive material.”<sup>25</sup> The *прорив* that breaches the droning noise in *Enthusiasm* designates, for Vertov, the minimal mark of constructedness (or filmic “tectonics,” to use Aleksei Gan’s Bogdanovite terminology).

Mixing the phraseless labor of the biological worker with cultural discourse, this moment of interaction between natural emission and discontinuous code marked the field of operations of Soviet production art. Vertov’s term *kino-veshch’* belongs, of course, to a larger discourse in the 1920s about the “thing” (*veshch’*), which formed a central component of artistic strategies to coalesce technological making into political action. For the production artist, the thing was also a social medium. From Boris Arvatov’s treatises on the “comrade-thing”<sup>26</sup> to the journal *Veshch’*, which was published by Erenburg and El Lissitzky, the syncretism of the category of “thingness,” which spanned industrial products, cultural works, and natural phenomena, gave the material object a pivotal role in

25. Vertov, *Iz naslediia II* (above, n. 17), p. 521.

26. Boris Arvatov, “Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing,” trans. Christina Kiaer, *October* 81 (1997): 119–128.

the project to redefine the political beyond the strict parameters of abstract discourse.

In a 1919 discussion of “the revolutionary mode of labor” (работа по-революционному), Lenin defined communism as a politics of everyday matter: “Communism begins when among *simple workers* there emerges a selfless concern [забота—the same word used by Erenburg’s LeBon to describe revolutionary affect] about protecting *every pood of grain, coal, iron* and other products that belong neither to the worker personally nor to those who are ‘close to him’ [близким], but those ‘at a distance’ [дальным], i.e. the entire society in its totality.”<sup>27</sup> This definition has a dual pertinence for our understanding of Vertov’s work and the projects of Russian production art. First, Lenin defines communism not as an abstract political program, but as a new affective organization that is cultivated through an empathy for the products of human labor (“empathy” understood not as sentimentality, of course, but in the strict sense of *Einfühlung*, namely, the projection of perception into matter). And second, Lenin views communism as a solution to a problem that is distinctly *spatial* in nature and, consequently, frames it as a media-theoretical issue: it is by establishing means of communication which link together people located “at a distance” that communism forges new communities of production.

Regarding the first point, Vertov saw in cinema a means for coalescing social networks robust enough to rival previous systems of human filiation. But unlike social units such as the tribe, the religious sect, the nation-state, or the nuclear family, the commune is notably less anthropocentric. Things—“every pood of grain, coal, iron”—are also members of this community of concern. In a reading of kino-eye, Gilles Deleuze would thus credit Vertov as the cinematic architect of the “dialectic in matter itself”:

What montage does, according to Vertov, is *to carry perception into things*, to put perception into matter, so that any point whatsoever in space itself perceives all the points on which it acts, or which act on it, however far these actions and reactions extend. . . . In Vertov this is clearly a case of Soviet revolutionary consciousness, of the “communist deciphering of reality.” It is that which unites the man of tomorrow with the world before man, communist man with the material universe of interactions defined as “community.”<sup>28</sup>

27. A “pood” is a unit of measurement that weighs approximately 16½ kilograms. Vladimir Lenin, “Velikii pochin” (A great start) (1919), in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 39 (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel’stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1963), p. 22.

28. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema I: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), pp. 81–82.

Vertov's films express this empathy for objects visually by embedding the movie camera into the apparatus of production, affixing it, for example, to moving objects like a coal transport or cranes and thus giving the viewer the impression that she perceives the world from the perspective of this object. This materialist sensibility and solicitude for the nonhuman world come to light in entries from Vertov's journals. For example, while shooting at the Dzerzhinsky plant during the summer of 1927, Vertov, an avid reader of Walt Whitman, noted: "I hesitate to talk of 'love' when speaking of my feelings toward this plant. And yet I do really feel as though I want to caress those gigantic smokestacks and black gas tanks."<sup>29</sup> Although Vertov's cathexis of the factory may strike us today as a bizarre case of libidinal displacement, perhaps our hesitation reflects not his ec-centricity, but our own blindness to the connections between humanity and its labor, especially once the latter has assumed objectivated form. Vertov and Lenin suggest that one prerequisite for the constitution of communist society is overcoming the anthropomorphic prejudices that prevent individuals from recognizing products of labor as objectivated pieces of themselves. Because we are unable to discern the human component in grain, coal, or iron, these things are lost to us as modalities of social intercourse, which is to say, as communicative media. But consequential Bolsheviks like the agronomist Milda Grignau, the protagonist from Sergei Tret'iakov's play *I Want a Baby* (1927), recognize the humanity of objects: when accused of loving her grain as much as she loves her infant son, Milda replies with scandalous frankness: "I love *all* of my products."<sup>30</sup>

The second aspect of Lenin's communism—the role of the thing as a conduit connecting people across great distances (дальные)—became for Vertov a medialogical axiom. As is well-known, the development of the modern media was historically conditioned by processes of industrialization that de-territorialized older feudal social orders and scattered the newly mobilized populations across the planet. It has been noted, for example, that the construction of the modern rail network necessitated a technology that would allow for the instantaneous transmission of information across great spatial expanse; thus emerged the twinned fortunes of the railway system and the telegraph. Modern "globalized" geopolitical space

29. Dziga Vertov, *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, trans. Kevin O'Brien, ed. Annette Michelson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 169.

30. This line is from the second version of the play, which was translated by Bertolt Brecht and Ernst Hube under the title "Die Pionierin." Reprinted as an appendix in Fritz Mierau, *Erfindung und Korrektur: Tretjakows Ästhetik der Operativität* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1976), p. 244.

and modern media developed symbiotically. And nowhere was this connection clearer than in Russia, which was an empire spanning, as Vertov titled one of his films, one-sixth of the world. Even more than was the case in Western Europe, where the population for the most part still remained densely clustered in urban sites, the issue of communications across spatial expanse became a decidedly *Soviet* media problem. This issue is at the center of Vertov's definition of kino-eye: "The basis for our program is . . . a *film bond* [киносвязь] *between peoples of the USSR and the entire world based on the platform of the communist decoding of what actually exists.*"<sup>31</sup> Similarly: "We want to . . . give everyone working behind a plow or a factory workbench the opportunity to see all of his brothers who are working simultaneously with him in different corners of the world and to see all of his enemies, the exploiters."<sup>32</sup> Like the ontological distance that results from capital's mechanisms of division and accumulation, the geographical dispersal that results from modernization's processes of spatial de-territorialization may be ineluctable, but it is not insuperable. Communication and empathy with those "at a distance" (дальные), which Vertov made possible by "put[ing] together any given points in the universe,"<sup>33</sup> was the foundation of Bolshevik mediology.

There is one additional feature that distinguishes the trajectory of the modern media in Russia from their development in the industrialized West. For Vertov, who shared with the production artists of the 1920s a definition of the media that was far more capacious and adaptable than the one that reigned in Western Europe, all varieties of objects could be enlisted as potential means for communication. Unlike in Europe, where only a very limited range of phenomena, such as newspaper, film, photography, and radio, was recognized as "media," in Russia, the definition of the media embraced any number of technical ensembles. The constructivists, for example, foregrounded the dialogical disposition of everyday things, which they designed to be "congruent counterparts of the subject" and "site[s] for the realization of human consciousness through the object."<sup>34</sup> This discovery of the communicative capacities of everyday objects went hand-in-hand with a redefinition of the mass media.

31. Vertov, *Iz naslediia II* (above, n. 17), p. 92. Emphasis in original.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 81.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 41.

34. Hubertus Gassner, "The Constructivists: Modernism on the Way to Modernization," in *The Great Utopia* (New York: Guggenheim, 1992), p. 318; Christina Kiaer, "Boris Arvatov's Socialist Objects," *October* 81 (1997): 109.

One can tender any number of speculations about why the mediological imagination flourished so brilliantly in Russia in the 1920s, but this eruption of unconventional approaches to the media was determined, at least in part, by differences in the course and pacing of modernization in Russia: whereas in Europe, technologies such as photography were assimilated gradually and developed, one could say, endogenously, the shock industrialization of the New Economic Policy and the First Five-Year Plan introduced, en masse, into everyday life in Russia an entire range of media at a single moment. As a result of their extreme novelty and unfamiliarity, especially in the non-Europeanized parts of Russia (where, incidentally, Vertov began his career as a filmmaker), these media were denuded of the aura of naturalness that they enjoyed in the West. Invisible and commonplace in Europe, in the Russian context the new media became highly conspicuous phenomena, and it was the sheer strangeness and freshness of media long since naturalized in Western Europe that occasioned in Russia highly experimental work with the media, as well as inventive thinking about the very conditions of mediality itself. The strikingly original configurations and deployments of the media in Russia of the 1920s thus propose an engrossing and endlessly evocative episode in the history of alternative media anthropologies. After returning from Russia in 1927, Walter Benjamin observed that the introduction there of media like radio and film had initiated “one of the most grandiose mass-psychological experiments ever undertaken in the gigantic laboratory that Russia has become.”<sup>35</sup>

Vertov gave expression to this idiosyncratic medialogy in one of his more eccentric rhetorical flourishes. At a debate in September 1923 on the question “Will there be a Russian cinematography?” Vertov offered the following anecdote:

Not long ago, I think it was at a screening of *Kino-Pravda* no. 17, a certain filmmaker—I hope that he’s in the audience today—announced “This is an outrage! These are shoemakers, not filmmakers!”

An expert viewer of films, the constructivist Aleksei Gan was close by and noted sensibly: “If only we had more of these shoemakers, then everything would be just fine!”

Speaking now as the author of *Kino-Pravda* no. 17, I would be very flattered to have his unconditional recognition as *the first shoemaker of Russian cinema*.<sup>36</sup>

35. Walter Benjamin, “On the Present Situation of Russian Film,” in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2: 1927–1934, trans. Rodney Livingstone et al., ed. Michael Jennings et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 14.

36. Vertov, *Iz naslediia II* (above, n. 17), p. 395.

The triumph of shoemaking over filmmaking in this quote reprises the familiar contrast between utilitarianism and “representationalism” (изобразительство) that structured the diatribes of the production artists: rather than making images using the medium of cinema (mere *kino-kartiny*, or “moving pictures”), the “shoemaker” Vertov constructed tangible *kino-veshchi*, film-things made of celluloid. When speaking of his *kino-veshchi*, Vertov would regularly describe a materialist approach to filmmaking much like the one now associated with avant-garde figures such as Stan Brakhage and Peter Kubelka (who was, not incidentally, responsible for restoring Vertov’s *Enthusiasm* in 1972): “We were the first to build *kino-veshchi* with our bare hands,” Vertov proudly declared.<sup>37</sup>

This sensitivity toward the tangibility and materiality of film owed much to Gan, and it cannot be surprising that the latter should be cited as the source of such a seemingly outré category-mistake—designating Vertov as a shoemaker—given Gan’s strategic disregard for the conventions of traditional artistic mediums and genres. This observation by Gan attests to the permeability of the boundary between mute matter and communicative media. Eschewing the dualist distinction between ideational meaning (“content”) and physical support (“medium”) that organized thinking about the media in Western Europe, constructivist objects demonstrate as “congruent counterparts of the subject” the essentially dialogical disposition of all products of human labor, whether they be shoes, grain, iron, or film. For the production artist, everything touched by the human hand was a potential medium.

In this regard, Vertov’s inventive medialogy anticipates a position articulated by the design theorist Vilém Flusser, who argued that all products of human labor contain knowledge, albeit often nondiscursive and pragmatic knowledge that remains on the register of an object’s utility. The manufacture of an object must be understood, Flusser explains, as the production of information: to create a thing is to give form to raw stuff—literally, to in-form matter. Conversely, the use of a manufactured object requires that the consumer decode it, which is to say to access the latent informational content that the producer has realized in the stuff of the object. To use an object is to decipher it. Flusser writes: “In the case of objects of use, I come across designs projected by other people. . . . Objects of use are therefore mediations (media) between myself and other people,

37. Ibid.

38. Vilém Flusser, “Design: Obstacle for/to the Removal of Objects” in *The Shape of Things: A Philosophy of Design*, trans. Anthony Mathews (London: Reaktion, 1999), p. 59.



not just objects. They are not just objective, but inter-subjective as well, not just problematic but dialogic as well."<sup>38</sup> This informational component, this dialogical orientation, distinguishes the natural object from the product of human labor: "Industrial objects are valuable precisely because they convey information. A shoe and a piece of furniture are valuable because they are information-carriers, improbable forms made of leather or wood and metal. . . . This is what makes such objects, as objects, valuable, i.e. able to be filled with value."<sup>39</sup>

If Flusser himself never explored the congruencies between his notion of manufacture as "in-formation" and the Marxist definition of value as an investment of labor—quite astonishing, considering that "value" and its cognates are invoked four times in the previous quote—the intersection between information theory and political economy is entirely explicit in the work of the Soviet production artists. The output of the VKhUTEMAS workshops and their affiliates raises compelling questions about the relationship between ideology and object production: What is the ideological valence of a work outfit designed by Aleksandr Rodchenko in 1922? Is there a discernibly Bolshevik content to the chair built by Vladimir Tatlin in 1927? If these everyday things appear to be beyond the ambit of political ideology and social codes, the famous reverse sequences from Vertov's 1924 film *Kino-Eye* tell a different story: here, the movie camera is used to expose the difference between Bolshevik beef and capitalist beef, between Bolshevik bread and capitalist bread. Long before Flusser, Vertov revealed that bodies of cultural knowledge are encoded into the seemingly most guileless and nonideological of commodities.

This materialist medialogy leads to one logical, although perhaps unanticipated, conclusion: Vertov was not a filmmaker. Vertov himself said as much when he declared programmatically in 1925 that "cinematography, as something that is autonomous, DOES NOT EXIST." Those who agitate for cinema as an independent art form, he explained, have wrongly identified their object: advocates of the art of cinema champion not a pure medium, but "cine-drama," "cine-poems," "cine-theater," and so on—namely, all forms of "cinematography" that are found in combination with other already-existing arts.<sup>40</sup> With no identity as an autonomous medium, film exists

39. Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, trans. Anthony Mathews (London: Reaktion, 2000), pp. 51–52.

40. Vertov, *Iz naslediia II* (above, n. 17), p. 62.

only in conjunctions with other arts.<sup>41</sup> There is no such thing as an unalloyed cinematography.

Vertov's denial of cinema's claim to be a discrete medium prompts the scholar to remove his works from the context of film history and cinema studies, and situate them instead within the trajectories of production art then current. Like other optical devices, such as the telescope or the microscope with which the camera can be conjoined, the movie camera became for "filmmaker-production artists" like Vertov (кинematографисты–производственники)<sup>42</sup> a scientific instrument for epistemological inquiry. For Vertov, film was no more of an artistic medium than telescope or microscopy are mediums.<sup>43</sup> It is important to recall here that the Russian word *kinoapparat* is terminologically less specific than its English equivalent "movie camera," which alludes very clearly to a specific optical device, the camera obscura. For Vertov, this specific configuration of the cinematic apparatus was not to be presumed. At certain times, he would refer to the *kinoapparat* as a *pribor* ("device");<sup>44</sup> at others, he would use an even more circumspect and indeterminate periphrasis, *kinematograficheskii apparat* ("cinematographic apparatus"),<sup>45</sup> separating *kino* from *apparat* as if to underscore the fact that their conjunction is in no way naturally given. The combination of a camera obscura with photosensitive emulsion was just one potential realization of the experimental *apparat*.<sup>46</sup>

41. Raymond Williams has explained that when film first came into being, it had no identity as an autonomous medium until it was conjoined with the dramatic arts: "when motion pictures were developed, their application was characteristically in the margin of established social forms—the sideshows—until their success was capitalized in a version of an established form, the motion-picture *theatre*"; see Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 10–11 (emphasis in original).

42. Vertov, *Iz naslediia II* (above, n. 17), p. 395.

43. "Our eye sees very poorly and very little. Thus the microscope was devised in order to see invisible phenomena. Thus the telescope was dreamt up in order to see and investigate unknown, distant worlds. Thus the movie camera was invented in order to penetrate more deeply into the visible world, in order to investigate and record visible phenomena, in order not to forget what takes place and to consider what will necessarily take place in the future" (ibid., p. 59).

44. Ibid., p. 110.

45. Ibid., p. 149.

46. Jean-Louis Comolli explains, for example, that the hypostatization of the movie camera as the essence of cinema occults the larger technical and social dimensions of the apparatus. He writes that the conventional notion of the camera as a discrete device "is used metonymically to represent the whole of film technique—the part which

A near infinite number of technical combinations were possible, as Vertov suggested in *Man With a Movie Camera*. The very title of this film underscores the apparatus's capacity for interfacing. In this work, which offers a single, extended, self-reflexive *obnazhenie priema* ("laying bare of the device"), the camera is always multiple, confronting itself and conjoining with other technologies to reveal the vastness of the cinematic apparatus: the camera interfaces with a variety of devices, mounted on everything from tripods to automobiles and trolleys; the celluloid record is archived and then processed on the cutting workbench; even the projectionist, the projector, and the theater are recognized as technical parts of cinema's machinery. All of these moments constitute components of the "apparatus," understood by Vertov in its expanded sense. Not surprisingly, Vertov deplored the containment of studio shooting and the restrictions that it imposed on the cinematographic apparatus. To apprehend this apparatus, *Man With a Movie Camera* suggests, requires considering a social and technical ensemble that is at times almost as immense as life itself. Kino-eye, he declared, "moves through the chaos of life."<sup>47</sup> Ultimately, the massiveness of this apparatus can only be revealed in medias res, in the midst of things. Vertov writes:

Through the process of observing and shooting the chaos of life is gradually clarified. Nothing is accidental. Everything is explicable and governed by law. . . . All this—the factory rebuilt, the lathe improved by a worker, the new public dining hall, the outdoor village nursery, the exam passed with honors, the new road, new highway, new streetcar, new bridge, the locomotive repaired on schedule—all of this has its own sense [все это имеет свой смысл].<sup>48</sup>

As this quote demonstrates, social value and meaning are not just effects of discourse, but can be found in all kinds of in-formed—that

*stands for the whole. It's brought forward as the visible part standing for the whole of the technique.*" This reduction of all of cinema to a compact device, the movie camera, is an ideological distortion. The reification of the movie camera as the natural or ontological sine qua non of cinematography "reproduces the separation which still marks the technical practice of cinema—between the visible part of film technique and its 'invisible' part. . . . The visible part of film technique (camera, shooting, crew lights, screen) suppresses the invisible part (frame lines, chemistry, fixing and developing, baths, and laboratory processing, negative, the cuts and joins of montage technique, sound track, projector, etc.) and the latter is generally relegated to the unreasoned, 'unconscious' part of cinema." See Comolli, "Technique and Ideology: Camera, Perspective, Depth of Field, Part I," *Film Reader 2* (1977): 131 (emphasis in original).

47. *Ibid.*, p. 184.

48. Dziga Vertov, "Chelovek s kinoapparatom," in *Iz naslediiia I: Dramaturgicheskie opyty* (Moscow: Eizenshtein-tsentr, 2004), pp. 123–126, quote on 125–126.

is, organized—objects. Operating on the register of matter itself, Vertov's *kino-veshchi*, which brook no distinction, as he put it, between "the categories of talking, noise, or sound," socialized matter without subordinating it to language. In the case of *Enthusiasm*, the relativization of the human voice amidst the continuous murmur of nature and industry resulted in a semantic opacity that struck some as nonsense. The film leaves a "confused, chaotic impression," as one spectator complained at a February 1931 screening; indeed, Vertov conceded, it was "overloaded with material."<sup>49</sup> Much like the trans-rational poetry of Aleksei Kruchenykh, who transformed language into pure psychophonetic vocalization, Vertov's films reserve for themselves, as Oleg Aronson notes, the "right to noncomprehension" (право на непонимание).<sup>50</sup> But the dialectic in matter is not without a certain logic, even if this logic at times eludes symbolic reasoning. To those critics who claimed that the *kino-veshch'* was nonsense, Vertov replied that the thing "has its own sense" (имеет свой смысл).

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49. Cited in MacKay, "Disorganized Noise" (above, n. 21), pt. 1, p. 3; pt. 3, p. 2.

50. Oleg Aronson, "Kommunizm vrasplokh. Neokonchennyi eksperiment Dzigi Vertova," in *Metakino* (Moscow: Ad Marginem, 2003), pp. 75–87, quote on 87.