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## From "The Eleventh Year" to "The Man with a Movie Camera": conceptual search of Dziga Vertov

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### Abstract

The objective of this study is to analyze the outcomes of Dziga Vertov's conceptual search based on his works, *The Eleventh Year* (1928) and *The Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), which became the most remarkable documentaries in the Soviet cinematography. The authors also go into the reasons of diametrically opposite reviews of the critics on these films. This article is based on little-known critical publications about these films in the Ukrainian and Russian media in the 1920s.

Dziga Vertov came to the All-Ukrainian Photo Cinema Administration (VUFKU) after being fired from Sovkino. Dziga Vertov retained a lot of material shot for the upcoming film, *The Man with a Movie Camera*, on which he had been working for quite a long time. However, Ukraine stipulated a mandatory condition that he should film *The Eleventh Year*, a movie about the progress achieved by the republic after the October Revolution. Analysis of Vertov's contemporaries' polemics about *The Eleventh Year* and *The Man with a Movie Camera* on pages of specialized journals in the 1920s showed that the most common types of publications were:

1. Unconditional recognition (combination of revolutionary ideas with vivid means of expression).
2. Brutal criticism (exaggerated aestheticism and deviation from the Socialist ideology).

**Keywords:** film history, USSR, VUFKU, Dziga Vertov, documentary film, avant-garde, Kiev film studio, eleventh year.

### 1. Introduction

The artwork of Dziga Vertov as a film director, especially in the Ukrainian period (1927–1930), is still not extensively researched, although a number of publications about these years have been released. The purpose of this article is to explore the conceptual search of director Dziga Vertov while working on his landmark films — *The Eleventh Year* (1928) and *The Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), and to introduce the materials of little-known articles on this topic from the 1920s Ukrainian and Russian press into scientific use.

### 2. Materials and methods

The materials of our study are academic books and articles written recently and in the 1920s about the creative work of Dziga Vertov. The study is based on substantive analysis and comparative approach.

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The comprehensive research methodology used by the authors ensured consideration of all aspects and relationships that affected the process under study. The research methods used in the work include comparative and systematic historical approaches.

### 3. Discussion

As shown by our analysis of film studies literature of the recent decades, in scientific works dealing with the Soviet cinema of the 1920s great emphasis is placed on versatile research of the artwork of director Dziga Vertov, especially his two films: *The Eleventh Year* (1928) and *The Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) (Chukur, 2016; Fore, 2013; Gillespie, 2000; Hicks, 2007; Judith, 1989; Manovich, 2012; O'Brien, 1984; Priest, 2008; Zabel, 2012).

D. Fore pointed out a very interesting feature in the structure of *The Eleventh Year*. According to the researcher, the film combines two seemingly unrelated and chronologically distant periods of time: the construction of the world's largest hydroelectric power station on the Dnieper River in Ukraine, and the excavation of two-thousand-year-old Scythian tombs at the site of an industrial enterprise. In particular, D. Fore writes: "If, by the middle of *The Eleventh Year*, the construction site on the Dnieper has been transformed into an ancient pyramid, later sequences of the film then take the viewer deep into the heart of the factory necropolis where human and machine–labor in its living and objectivated formats – interact against explosions of molten metal and machine constructions" (Fore, 2013). This is what Vertov wrote about in his notes for the film. The director believed that such an approach to film layout should be understood as some kind of "revival" of the ancestors, whose spirits possessed the factory equipment.

J. Hicks views *The Eleventh Year* as Vertov's new course towards making even bolder experimental films, which seems incredibly daring considering that the previous two Vertov's films were already innovative. According to J. Hicks, in the "late 1920s, avant-garde artists increasingly had a sense that their time had gone, that the revolution no longer had any place for them". In support of this hypothesis, the scientist cites a 1925 statement by Vertov's associate Alexei Gan: "The time of slogans for the present has passed" (Hicks, 2007). Of course, Vertov's experiment was well ahead of its time in many ways, and raised a tide of indignation. Vertov was harshly criticized for focusing all the attention in the film on various mechanisms and machines, and leaving almost no screen time for workers, miners and peasants. Obviously, given his "bad" experience, in the next film, *The Man with a Movie Camera*, which can be seen as a sarcastic response to *The Eleventh Year*, Vertov puts a human on the foreground.

However, putting the human on the foreground in *The Man with a Movie Camera* (even in the title) does not contradict Vertov's concept of a documentary, where dramatic acting is eliminated. The main character here is the cameraman shooting a film. Therefore, it is very interesting to observe how people are shown in the film. In his book *Editing the Past: How Eisenstein and Vertov Used Montage to Create Soviet History*, D. Priest argues that by associating the industrial equipment with socialism, Vertov further associates technology specifically with the awakening of a woman. In particular, D. Priest writes: "Vertov shows a woman waking on a park bench in montage with transportation vehicles coming online for the beginning of their day. The vehicles are shown leaving their garages and acting as public transportation. Here Vertov is lauding the new socialist society in terms of its effect on gender relationships. The woman, who had historically been subordinate in traditional Russian society, is awakened by revolution to become a participating member of the proletariat. His specific choice to use vehicles seems to indicate his idea of the awakening woman as a form of moving forward or progress" (Priest, 2008). Without doubt, the awakening of a woman in the film can be seen as the awakening of socialism. Showing a woman in this context reflects the communist rhetoric about gender equality in the early years of the Soviet Union. Thus, Vertov needed to show the awakening woman in order to portray the communist ideals and affirm the ideal woman's nature in a socialist society.

The scene of woman's awakening also drew the attention of J. Mayne. In the chapter "The Man with a Movie Camera and Woman's Work" she notes that close-ups are used in this scene. The movie camera alternates with images of women's eyes. Her hazy vision clears up as the scene outside her window fades in (Mayne, 1989). This technique explains Vertov's concept of inferiority of the human eye versus the Cine-Eye. Thus, according to J. Mayne, movie camera begins to replace the imperfect human vision. The camera has, at the very least, a two-fold function here. It is both a point of view within the film, and a substitute for the woman's own vision. Such a

fusion of subject and object – through the camera, the woman becomes both the object seen and the perceiving subject – is, perhaps, the most Utopian vision in the film” (Mayne, 1989).

In his theoretical writings, Vertov highlighted the camera’s unique ability to truthfully depict the reality, this creating the Cine-Truth. The director believed that the main objective of filmmaking is to capture “life as it is”, avoiding any literary and dramatic references. He also criticized traditional fiction films, and his groundbreaking *The Man with a Movie Camera* was created without any script, intertitles, set, professional actors – the typical components of filmmaking. Only the lens of a movie camera can record life like a pen.

A. Chukur also writes about Vertov’s approach to filmmaking. In her work she quotes an article by the Ukrainian writer Aleksei Poltoratsky ‘Man with a Montblanc’ (1929), where he compares his Montblanc pen, typewriter and a radio with Dziga Vertov’s movie camera. That is, the pen is metaphorically compared to a weapon that “sediments the facts”. In particular, A. Chukur writes: “Emulating such camera perspective, his literary narration represented by its material from a point of view beloved by avant-gardists: that of a machine. In this way, the camera eye was adapted as a useful device and a narrative mode of choice for recording factual material in literature” (Chukur, 2016).

Beyond doubt, *The Man with a Movie Camera* is an outstanding film not only in Dziga Vertov’s filmography, but also among other Soviet films of the 1920s. In the script proposal Vertov called his future film a “visual symphony”. In particular, the director noted that *The Man with a Movie Camera* constitutes an experiment in the cinematic transmission of visual phenomena without the aid of intertitles, script, actors and sets. Vertov’s script proposal is published in the book ‘Kino-Eye: the writings of Dziga Vertov’. Quote from the book: “Kino-eye’s new experimental work aims to create a truly international film-language, absolute writing in film, and the complete separation of cinema from theater and literature. Like *The Eleventh Year*, *The Man with a Movie Camera* is, on the other hand, closely connected to the radio-eye period, which kinoks define as a new and higher stage in the development of nonacted film” (O’Brien, 1984).

Vertov’s aesthetic views were worlds apart from those of another Soviet avant-garde artist Sergei Eisenstein. Eisenstein denounced the acted cinematography and believed that masses were the mainspring of a film. At the same time, he believed that typecasts having visual resemblance to characters from the script should be involved instead of actors. Vertov, on the other hand, believed that acted cinematography or elements thereof violate the fundamental principle of cinematography – capturing life as it is.

However, these avant-garde filmmakers shared some common views on the objectives of the Soviet cinema. G. Zabel analyzed the legacy of Eisenstein and Vertov, and retrieved some examples of their shared views: “From the beginning of their careers, they thought of cinema as a weapon of class struggle. Their work as artists on agit-trains influenced all of their later cinematic work, and they never ceased to regard cinema as an art of agitation, though in a sense that remains to be examined. The formal innovations of the two directors had great significance, not least because they won them an international audience that has now outlasted the Soviet Union itself. But in the minds of the directors, including Vertov, advances in cinematic form were not ends in themselves, but meant to serve the defense, preservation, and advance of the Revolution” (Zabel, 2012).

Vertov claimed that a theatrical film, a film with a script, is false at its core. In keeping with his Cine-Eye theory, he organized his own film crew, which he considered part of the development of the Red Soviet Cinema. Unlike Eisenstein, Vertov aspired to create films not only revolutionary in their content, but also international in their form. His experimental work was aimed at creating a truly international, absolute cinematic language, that is completely separated from the language of theater and literature. *The Man with a Movie Camera* is radical in its virtuoso style, with its rapid, sometimes even blazing pace, use of split screen and slow motion. D. Gillespie, using the films *The Man with a Movie Camera* and *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* as examples, quite logically compares the works of two Soviet documentary filmmakers Dziga Vertov and Esfir Shub: “Shub edits her material to achieve substantial effects of irony, such as the juxtaposition of the affluence of the pre-Revolutionary nobility and the back-breaking toil of agricultural workers. The Tsar’s statue lying smashed on the ground becomes a symbol of the destruction of the monarchy. However, her approach to documentary film-making differs from that of Vertov not only in editing, but also structure. The defining feature of *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* is the use of inter-titles to drive the narrative forward, and explain what the screen shows. In *The Man*

with the Movie Camera Vertov has little need of a written text, and leaves the film itself to tell its story” (Gillespie, 2000).

The main difference in the creative approach of these directors is that Vertov edits the frames shot by his own cameraman, while Shub compiles, edits and interprets the existing historical documentary materials picked from various sources.

L. Manovich published a very interesting study analyzing the visualizations of *The Eleventh Year* and *The Man with a Movie Camera*. The scientist makes extensive use of histograms and line graphs in his work. As a result of his research, he found out that the average shot length (ASL) in six movies by Vertov and Eisenstein was 3.1 seconds, while the ASL of other films made in 1921–1930 was 7.9 seconds. L. Manovich also discovered another feature that distinguishes *The Eleventh Year* from *The Man with a Movie Camera* – the presence of a number of very long shots (Manovich, 2012).

### 3. Results

The transition of individual members of Cine-Eye creative group (Dziga Vertov, his wife Elizaveta Svilova, and his brother Mikhail Kaufman) from Sovkino to VUFKU in 1928 gave a qualitative boost to the Ukrainian documentary filmmaking. Dziga Vertov with his team were working on a new film, *The Man with a Movie Camera*, and some episodes had already been filmed, when all of a sudden the chairman of Sovkino I. Traynin signed an order to dismiss Vertov. The official reason for dismissal was the overspending during the production of *The Sixth Part of the World*. After being fired, Vertov was unemployed for several months. But then he decided to contact VUFKU. In April 1927, the proposal to film *The Man with a Movie Camera* in Ukraine was accepted under the condition that Cine-Eye creative group would first shoot a film to celebrate the anniversary of the October Revolution, propagating the Communist Party’s course towards industrialization and electrification of the country.

Vertov created *The Eleventh Year* at the stage in his creative career when he made great advances in finding the specific documentary form for expressing new content. *The Eleventh Year* complies with the philosophical principle of the Cine-Eye platform: “life captured as it is”, “life taken by surprise” (besides Mikhail Kaufman, cameramen Boris Zeitlin and Konstantin Kulyaev were involved in the filming). In fact, the film was an illustration of the report at the XV Congress of the RCP(b). Vertov was going to make a motion picture for the 10th anniversary of the October Revolution, and the locations he selected were a metallurgical plant, coal mines and Dneprostroy. The main theme of the film was industrialization. Apart from industrial facilities, the film also depicts rural cooperatives, agricultural machines and processes of collectivization of villages.

The political canvas of this film is so conventional and simple, yet the camerawork and editing is so complex and daring. From the point of view of the 1920s left-wing artist that Vertov was, those ten years of socialism were a radical social experiment and therefore deserved the most radical and experimental portrayal.

Vertov was more interested in the aesthetic aspect of the work. *The Eleventh Year*, like all Cine-Eye’s films, was made without a script. In particular, Vertov said about the film that, firstly, it was written in the purest cinematic language, in the “visual language”, and was designed for visual perception, for “visual thinking”. Secondly, the film was written by a movie camera in the documentary language, in the language of facts recorded on tape. And thirdly, the film was written in the socialist language, in the language of the communist decoding of the visible (Vertov, 1966).

How was *The Eleventh Year* received? What prevailed in it – the innovative organic combination of revolutionary ideology with vivid expressive means, or experimental form-making aimed at discovering the technical capabilities of the camera and montage? After the release, the film sparked a massive outcry – there were a lot of reviews, both positive and negative. The Ukrainian press mainly referred to the film as the greatest achievement of the Soviet cinematography. But the most zealous discussions of *The Eleventh Year* were triggered by the publication of a review by critic Osip Brik in the New LEF journal in April 1928. Brik claimed that Vertov’s film lacks integrity, while Esfir Shub’s film, *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty*, compiled from archival footage, seems more wholesome due to a careful elaboration of the thematic and editing plan. And since *The Eleventh Year* was filmed sporadically, that is, the cameraman could film whatever he wanted, whenever he found something interesting to him, – this footage is excellent in terms of the cinematographer’s taste and skill, but it is aesthetic-driven, not factual (Brik, 1928).

Vertov incurred blame for fetishizing the exterior of the machines without delving into their intrinsic nature and their functions (Ozerov, 1930), without revealing the social meaning of the machines, without solving the problems of normal production processes (Pereguda, 1930), without portraying a man who builds socialism, so his film was called “an ultra-intelligent, refined relish of a steel machine” (Sip, 1928).

But the main reproach was that Vertov did not highlight the opposition of the “old” and “new” (plow vs. tractor, splinter vs. light bulb), and therefore created an anti-revolutionary and formalist film. A columnist for the *Life of Art* journal sarcastically noted: “Vertov’s attitude to the material in this film is aesthetic rather than socialist. Vertov fetishizes the machines. Volkhovstroy, Dneprostroy, factories, plants, mines, machines — for Vertov, they are not harbingers of strengthening of the country’s economic power, not cornerstones of a colossal building of socialism, but are merely an interesting material to play with. Machines are shown to work, but it’s not shown what they are working for” (Radin, 1928).

Most critics questioned the overall artistic value of the film. The main argument of the criticism was that Vertov did not grasp the “socialist tasks” assigned by the Communist Party to the workers of the Soviet cinema. Here are a few fragments of typical movie reviews that we managed to find.

“The portrayal of machines is precisely a mosaic element of the task, its background, industrial style. An average moviegoer might not even pick up on the social content in the machine itself, which is equally characteristic of a highly developed capitalist economy” (Lemar, 1928).

“But even this is not the major flaw of the film; the biggest mischief is the horrendous, probably unconscious perversion of the notion of socialist industry, industrial culture, industrial art, which Vertov discovers in this work... By means of exquisite editing and photographic tricks, Vertov and his cameraman Kaufman display almost absolutely non-objective, abstract movement “at its purest”, which smells strongly of the idealistic non-figurative “constructivism” of the Western European innovators-Dadaists and others of their ilk” (Shatov, 1928).

“*The Eleventh Year* is a picture to be criticized amicably. Dziga Vertov and his crew are a great squad of fanatics in our cinematography. Unfortunately, he is still dominated by a formalist attitude towards cinematic material as a value *per se*” (Beskin, 1928).

But there also were advocates of Vertov’s artwork. The chief editor of *Kino-Front* journal K. Shutko held to a diametrically opposite point of view. He believed that Vertov took newsreels to a higher level — relevant, capable of conveying the essence of the main selected material in the future, documenting the facts (Shutko, 1928). Shutko also refuted some critics’ opinion that if the author is aestheticizing the newsreels, they “diverge from the path of a newsreel and enter the sacred bosom of creativity, art, aestheticism, etc.” And, despite certain shortcomings, the film is “the strongest visual experience not only among all the cinematic works ever made, but even among Vertov’s own works” (Shutko, 1928).

Naum Kaufman, who studied the artwork of Cine-Eye from their very first days, defended Vertov’s creative platform in the *Soviet Screen* journal. He believed that mobbing up on Vertov was a shameful mistake of the director’s critics and colleagues. In particular, Kaufman noted: “After *The Eleventh Year*, our critics accused him of infecting the viewers with his own aesthetic experiences by montaging parts of the machines and by showing the external beauty of the machines’ rhythmicity without explaining their underlying meaning. In addition, he was accused of being politically ignorant and understanding the revolution mechanically, not socialistically. The critics underestimated the fact that Vertov was creating a new cinematic language, that he was building a new cinematography based on the montage of cinematographic observations” (Kaufman, 1928).

The *Soviet Screen*, a reputable journal, commented: “*The Eleventh Year* is a picture of great style and great pathos, which fully corresponds to the massive scale of our industrial construction” (Gvin, 1928). Nevertheless, Vertov assumed that the audience was generally not ready to perceive his aesthetic platform.

Vertov’s fundamental premise was that the human eye is not perfect, and the movie camera, on the contrary, is a faultless mechanism of human perception. With the help of a movie camera, the eye can see “further, deeper and better”. The human eye cannot be improved, while the movie cameras are constantly upgraded. Proceeding from this, Vertov believed that cameras should be widely used as a tool to explore the life: “Let the painter use the brush, theater — the actor, literature — the word; a movie camera is an unrivaled tool for expressing the complexity of life”.

In the script proposal of *The Man with a Movie Camera* submitted to VUFKU, Vertov pointed out that the film was incited by the crisis in the Soviet cinematography, which consisted in the downfall of cinematic expression and film language. Therefore, Cine-Eye members undertook a research and production experiment aimed at improving and advancing the film language. According to Vertov, *The Man with a Movie Camera* pursued the following objectives:

“First. To raise the low-level cinematic expression and film language to a higher ground, and thereby improve the quality of our film production.

Second. To set a mediocre conventional acted film with kisses and murders against a novel piece of filmmaking, using new ways of capturing the life without the help, services or mediation of an actor, set and studio.

Third. To create the USSR’s first ever film without words, without intertitles, that is, to approximate the cinematic language to the international language.

And finally, the fourth. To depict a fragment of vivacious, enthusiastic, cheerful work, so different from work under compulsion, work of people oppressed by capital” (Vertov, 2008).

Konstantin Feldman discovered five thematic lines in *The Man with a Movie Camera*: 1. A man with a movie camera observes the life and shows the results of his observations on the screen. 2. The viewers simultaneously see the depicted events through the naked human eye and from the perspective of the man with a movie camera. 3. Observation of the viewers’ reaction in the movie theater. 4. Vertov’s editor watches the life captured on cinefilm. 5. An invisible cameraman is observing the man with a camera (Feldman, 1929).

*The Man with a Movie Camera* received extremely mixed reviews. The difference in perception was illustrated by public viewings in Kharkiv and Kyiv. According to Vertov, most of the speakers in Kharkiv were negative about the picture. Someone even said that “it is nought, and Vertov should not ever be allowed to make films, and such waste of people’s money is a crime”. Conversely, most of the speakers in Kyiv favored the picture (Vertov, 2008).

After *The Man with the Movie Camera* was released, same as with *The Eleventh Year*, the film caused an unprecedented response. Reviewers mentioned excellent directing, masterful editing, innovative nature among the positive features of Vertov’s work.

“Technically, *the Man with a Movie Camera* uses a variety of types of shooting, all kinds of camera tricks, exquisite deformation of the material. This is a splendid firework of complex camera techniques. The daunting power of the film is in its montage based on mathematically coordinated musical structure. *The Man with a Movie Camera* is a shout of life. Documentation of the most elusive life phenomena. Cinematic materialization of the pulsating rhythm of life” (Kaufman, 1929).

“*The Man with a Movie Camera* is essentially an attempt to enrich the film language. This is what the cinema needed to break free from the literary patterns” (Feldman, 1929).

However, the majority of critical reviews rested on the opinion that the aesthetic platform in Vertov’s movies was set against the factual basis, and most importantly – on accusations of formalism and unwillingness to reflect the “socialist reality”. Here are some fragments of typical reviews of those times.

“Understatement crossed the line of apprehensibility in this film. The author of *The Man with a Movie Camera* got lost deep in the woods of excessive understatement, and not only does his city look like an empty theater at the beginning of the film, but all the six parts are total ideological emptiness” (Khmuryi, 1929).

“In their future works, Vertov’s crew should abandon emasculated technicism. What we expect from Vertov is not only mind-blowing pictures of glorious machines, but also deeply meaningful films portraying the Soviet reality through the eyes of a sociologist, and not just a movie camera” (Kor, 1929).

While the film was shown in Ukrainian cinemas, its release in the RSFSR was boycotted. Vertov explained that the chairman of the board of Sovkino K. Shvedchikov considered *The Man with a Movie Camera* a very interesting scientific experiment, which should not be demonstrated to a wide audience since most viewers would not understand it (Vertov, 1929).

However, being experimental is not the only reason why *The Man with a Movie Camera* was boycotted in the RSFSR. The so-called “rental war” which limited mutual distribution of films in the two republics was still ongoing in 1929.

## 5. Conclusion

Dziga Vertov can be called the father of *cinéma vérité*, as his visionary theories paved the way for a new style that affected the entire spectrum of filmmaking. Vertov deserves credit for his courage to implement his bold ideas and draw the attention of future filmmakers to a more realistic perception of the cinematic aesthetics. For several years Vertov claimed to be “holding the future of cinema in his hands”, and his artwork is convincing proof of his confidence in his own vision of the cinema.

The emotional dynamism and energy of *The Eleventh Year* reflect the prevalent agenda item of that time – industrialization. Rapid industrialization, the first five-year plan, collectivization of agriculture were the dominant factors in the development of the Soviet Union. Vertov’s first Ukrainian film was his response to this agenda.

In contrast to the pathos of *The Sixth Part of the World*, where the image on screen merged completely with the sounding word, in *The Eleventh Year* Vertov aspired to express the sound of the image itself. In his opinion, in *The Sixth of the World* the viewers listened to the intertitles addressed to them, and in *The Eleventh Year* they could see sounding images. *The Man with a Movie Camera* is an attempt to convey phenomena by cinematic means without the aid of intertitles, script, or theater. This novel experimental work was aimed at creating a truly international film language, fully separated from the language of theater and literature. In addition, *The Man with a Movie Camera*, just like *The Eleventh Year*, came right up to the edge of implementing the Radio-Eye concept, which film critics call the next stage in the development of documentary cinema. Vertov believed that this would be a transition from editing of facts captured on videotape (Cinema-Eye) to editing of audio-facts (Radio-Eye), and eventually to editing of facts that could be simultaneously seen, heard, smelled and touched.

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