

**VIEWERS TURNED INTO PARTICIPANTS:  
DZIGA VERTOV'S *A SIXTH PART OF THE WORLD*  
(1926)**

**I.**

“**T**he complete victory of the factory of facts over the factory of grimaces – that is what I expect from *A Sixth Part of the World*.” In these words Dziga Vertov, the Soviet Russian avant-garde filmmaker, refers to his new production in an interview for *Kino* magazine in August 17, 1926. By saying this, Vertov reiterates his ambition to reinvent the very concept of cinema. In order for cinema to become active part in the process of creation of a new socialist society, it had to be radically cut off from theatre and literature. This meant that everything that belonged to film as fiction – the plot, the sets, the actors, and the script – was to be rejected by Vertov and his collaborators.

The members of Vertov's group called themselves “kinoki,” a neologism combining the Russian words “kino” for cinema and “oko” for eye. By boycotting acted films, they wanted to show “life as it is,” devoid of any theatricality and liberated from the “grimaces” of the bourgeois world. The idea was to turn away from entertainment and commerce towards a mental self-reflective construction of reality – the

reality of the revolution. This involved various experiments with modes of perception and cognition, to an extent where vision was placed under the impossible imperative to become homologous with the incessantly moving and all seeing eye of the camera: “Freed from the rule of 16 – 18 frames per second, free of the limits of time and space, *I put together any given points of the universe, no matter where I have recorded them,*“ – this was the revolutionary message of the so-called “Kino-Eye“ manifesto from 1923.

The result was highly experimental films where reality and its assemblage merged into political statements. Driven by the ambition to decode the communist structures of the world, the cinematic “factory of facts” sought to establish a new truly *universal* language of the film by giving form to the material, by giving a “language” not only to the people but also to things and machines. The political and philosophical challenge consisted in uncovering the laws of their existence, of their function and interrelations. By editing the filmed material into successions of images, these laws were meant to be given a visual expression.

**II.**

*The Man With the Camera* (1929) has come to be seen as most

emblematic of Vertov's strivings to establish a new language of the screen. *A Sixth Part of the World* (1926), however, is in some respect even more interesting to consider. Not only does it illustrate very well the relationship between form and material in Vertov's art as well as its radical move away from theatre. The performative quality of the film also makes us become aware of those elements of Vertov's aesthetic experiment that in the end put it at risk of failure.

*A Sixth Part of the World* was edited based on newsreel material shot during ten expeditions in different parts of the USSR. The overall material comprised 26,000 meters of film. The result is astounding: The viewer witnesses "a six-reel camera race," as Yuri Tsivian called it, while the intertitles help to organize newsreel material into a film by giving it rhythm and semantic unity. The film's central theme is the industrialization of the Soviet Union. Its basic line is simple: The film shows the riches and the vast geographical space of the USSR, it shows how goods are being produced as well as the process of their delivery and exchange for the machines urgently needed in the process of industrialization.

In *A Sixth Part of the World* nature and culture, the geographical and the social spaces merge into the socialist project bigger than individual life. The film shows landscapes – harsh conditions of life in the North,

the beauty of the South, the Caucasus Mountains, the Siberian taiga, and the Arctic Ocean; it shows animals – horses, reindeers, and pigs, and it is full of ethnographic details exposing the everyday life of the people of different religions, customs, and languages. Without being aware of being filmed, people act "as they are," the film shows how everyone of them – no matter whether orthodox, moslem or pagan, a Samoyed eating raw reindeer meat, a shaman or a veiled women – everyone without exception becomes integrated into the state trading apparatus and, by virtue of that, into the new society. The film seeks to prompt the audience to the conclusion that even "the most backward peoples are involved in the construction of Socialism," as it is indeed stated in one of the intertitles.

Towards the end of *A Sixth Part of the World* a series of powerful shots of the icebreaker "LENIN" is shown to epitomize the revolutionary process. Within the composition of the filmic images the icebreaker serves as a link between the present and the future, thus becoming a symbol of social transformation. Not only does it move the export goods to the West, it also paves the way for the country's cultural progress, for its emancipation from prejudices, superstition, and illiteracy. Therefore *after* the icebreaker scene nothing remains as it was – women "cast away" their veils and become members in the Komsomol,

we see Samoyeds, Buriats, and Mongols reading newspapers, Mongolian children becoming Pioneers, images of reading halls and of the masses listening to the radio-lecture appear on the screen. The chimney smoke – an image that is repeatedly used throughout Vertov’s films – promises a better future not only for the workers but also for the peasants which “someplace still plough the earth with a stick” and now will be able to use machines.

What gives shape to *A Sixth Part of the World*, however, is that it is based on a sharp antagonism between the world of the Capital and the reality of socialist construction. The core idea is to show how the old world is doomed to be superseded by the new reality of socialism. This new reality is shown as a collective body, vibrant and alive. By contrast, the world of Capital is presented in a gaudy way by sketchy references to alienated workers in enormous factories in the West and to the colonies’ enslavement, by images of African Americans’ dancing for entertainment, of the foxtrots in a drawing room, of a bourgeois couple, and by images of a fur coat and a female’s necklace. The quintessence is summed up in one of the intertitles’ declamation that “on the verge of its historical perishing / Capital / is having fun.”

For these images of bourgeois and NEP pleasures, on the one hand, and blindness towards severe injustice, on the other, Vertov used

footage material that was filmed by someone else, as if he took the decision not to mingle his revolutionary “life off-guard”-style with bourgeois realities. By this opening sequence, Vertov sought to unmask the alienating, self-deceiving, and blindly calculating logic of capital but also to arouse in the viewers the sentiment of condemnation at the sight of it. This impression is, once again, reinforced by the intertitles: “In the land of Capital / I see / the golden chain of Capital / the foxtrot / the machines / and you / and you / I see you / and you / and you / and you / it is you I see / in the service of Capital.”

In view of all this, it appears odd, to say the least, that *A Six Part of the World* was commissioned by the State Trading Organization in order to promote export goods trade, among them most importantly, grain, hemp, the fish of the Caspian Sea, the tobacco of Abkhazia, the skins of the wild animals of the North which then for instance, strangely enough, go to the Leipzig Trade Fair to be displayed and sold. As Walter Benjamin described it in his essay “On the Present Situation of Russian Film” (March 11, 1927), the double message of the film was to show to the foreigners that “we are not dependent on foreign countries and natures – Russia is, after all, a sixth of the world! Everything in the world is here on our own soil.” As captured very clearly in the intertitles, the purpose of the film was to empower the people, all

people, to make everyone realize that “you Tatars / you Buriats / Uzbeks / Kalmyks / Khakkass / mountaineers of the Caucasus / you, Komi people / [...] and you, of a distant village / [...] / All of you are the masters of the Soviet land / hold in your hands a sixth part of the world.” The ideological purpose, in other words, was to fuse the audience home and abroad with the enthusiasm for the reality of the socialist revolution.

The film was controversially received, acclaimed by a number of critics as “an authentic cinema symphony,” even compared to the poetry of Walt Whitman (indeed a source of inspiration for Vertov) but also severely criticized as “naive” and as a “failure” by others. Walter Benjamin’s entry into his Moscow diary on January 5, 1927 also clearly betrays some disappointment: “I went to see *One-Sixth of the World* (at the Arbat cinema). But there was much that escaped me.” Two months later, in his essay on Russian Film cited above Benjamin is more explicit about what went wrong: “It must be admitted that Vertov, the director, has not succeeded in meeting his self-imposed challenge of showing through characteristic images how the vast Russian nation is being transformed by the new social order. The filmic colonization of Russia has misfired.” Despite the rich material, the director loses its aesthetic object of the on-going revolution. – Why did that happen? What are the

reasons for that?

### III.

The failure of the film is connected with Vertov’s own theoretical assumptions on which it is based, in particular his strategic decision to abandon the distinction between the “viewers and the spectacle.” For Vertov, as he himself explains in the interview mentioned above, “[t]he very concept of this film and its whole construction are now resolving in practice the most difficult theoretical question of the eradication of the boundary between viewers and spectacle.” He develops this point further by stating that “*A Sixth Part of the World* cannot have critical opponents or critical supporters within the borders of the USSR, since both the opponents and the supporters are also participants in the film.”

This “theoretical question” how to fuse observers with the participants is in itself unproblematic. We could even say that it is clearly connected with the promise of democratization – the promise that everyone can become part of art either by watching it or by being filmed. This is one of the main emancipatory consequences resulting from the kinoki project of replacing feature films by the newsreel. Walter Benjamin, as the following passage from his essay *The Work of*



MIL, NUOVI SILENZI (PART.)

*Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936) demonstrates, has recognized very clearly why this shift was so significant: “[T]he newsreel offers everyone the opportunity to rise from passer-by to movie extra. In this way any man might even find himself part of a work of art, as witness Vertov’s *Three Songs About Lenin*,” and then he adds affirmatively: “Any person today can lay claim to being filmed.”

This notion of promoting the process of democratization by relying solely on the permanence of the aesthetic revolution brings us very close to Jacques Rancière’s understanding of what “artistic modernity” actually means. In his recent study, *Aisthesis* (2013) Rancière claims that art emerges as a *recent* phenomenon “when this hierarchy of forms of life begins to vacillate,” it begins “by giving itself a new subject, the people, and a new place, history.” In order to document this process, Rancière writes a “counter-history of ‘artistic modernity’.” Spread out in a series of *Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art* this “counter-history” demonstrates “how art, far from foundering upon these intrusions of the prose of the world, ceaselessly redefined itself – exchanging, for example, the idealities of plot, form and painting for those of movement, light and the gaze [...]” Bearing this in mind, it is far from being surprising that one of Rancière’s scenes is devoted precisely to Vertov’s *A Sixth part of the world*. For Rancière Vertov’s films were able

to show “the dynamism of collective forms that cuts across any particular activity.”

This dynamism is indeed the source for *enthusiasm* that *A Sixth part of the world* conveys. Yet, at the same time, there is a sense that something went dramatically wrong. Cinema that negates the logic of theatre seems to lose sight of an important element of aesthetic experience in theatre, – an experience that is grounded on the aesthetic *distance* between the audience and what is being performed on stage. By keeping all theatrical elements away from film, Vertov seems to destroy the aesthetic distance altogether. By erasing the distance between the observer and the aesthetic object, however, Vertov also relinquishes the critical potential that is crucial to any process of political and social transformation.

Vertov goes as far as claiming that “this film has, strictly speaking, no ‘viewers’ within the borders of the USSR, since all the working people of the USSR (130-140 million of them) are not viewers but participants in this film.” The vision he has is that the viewers turned into participants will all be bound by the force of the “emotional action” from which the bourgeois world necessarily remains “isolated” and therefore becomes “the enemy of the Soviet State.” The outcome is, however, that what is called “emotional action” becomes

indistinguishable from a major self-deception: What the viewer is confronted with is an investment of human labour and life – his own labour and life – into a huge industrialization process devoid of any meaning and blind towards its own future. Thus, to implicitly quote Rancière, the “strategic will” of building a new social order literally “loses its world.”

And yet, despite all this, the decisive question remains, the question how to transform the “material” of this world, the raw data of facts, so to speak, into *political* statements that are able to generate true generalities. In other words, how is the cinematic language of facts to be thought of that is capable of making *visible* the *community* of people and things? Surprisingly, this idea can be best expressed when turning to Kant. In a way, the Kantian “I think” – as a condition of possibility for any act of cognition – has been replaced in Vertov’s art by the “I see.” The purpose of the gigantic “I see” that is visualized by the intertitles is “to fuse the film with its viewers” in order to make a new community of men free and equal *visible* – a community that takes shape in the sensible life. It seems that the problem residing here is distinctly Kantian as it leads us to the question *how ideas translate into reality*.

In the 1980s Jean-François Lyotard in his lecture entitled “Enthusiasm: The Kantian Critique of History” (1986) addressed this

problem by suggesting to focus on the “passages” between the realm of ideas and the realm of experience in Kant’s philosophy, “passages that to be sure are not bridges.” Kant’s concept of *enthusiasm* proved to be vital for this analysis. Lyotard links this concept with the idea of the sublime. Human sensitivity towards the sublime indicates that the recipient of this specific type of affect is able to realize – against the overwhelming but shapeless power of nature – that there is nothing standing against moral destiny and human freedom. In its most radical form, the capacity to set out purposes in the world, to determine oneself freely and ultimately the capacity to *culture* (as the trace of freedom in the world) is experienced as a felt paradox: Something that is “formless” (for instance, a force of nature) makes us aware of something lying outside of the experience, this “outside” is for Kant the idea of the cosmopolitan society, the “*weltbürgerliche Gesellschaft*,” that can neither be represented nor put into practice *as such* by entering in the realm of experience but nevertheless reveals itself in the culturally transformed nature of our affect. – For our thinking, emancipatory events are always “*cases*,” as Lyotard following Kant himself suggests calling them. As they fall out of the realm of necessity, they possess an atemporal and coincidental character. They are “signs” that make us sense the absolute goodness of the moral idea despite the

formless event in practice. Therefore Lyotard speaks of a “complex hypotyposis” in which two incommensurable sentiments coexist. In fact, enthusiasm is a strong indication of such *passage* between nature and freedom.

The complex structure where incommensurable ideas are brought in relation with each other in an unexpected way is, in fact, one of the distinguishing features of the technique of dialectical montage Vertov deploys. However, coming back to the notion of *enthusiasm*, the difference between the Kantian concept of this significant emotion and the strategy Vertov chose for *A Sixth Part of the World* is absolutely striking: Kant speaks of enthusiasm when he describes the experiences of a *non-participating* public watching the events of the French Revolution as they unfold. The passive observers are nonetheless active as they experience a complex emotion: As Lyotard sums up Kant’s view, the emotional state of the spectator on the occasion of this event oscillates between the “pathological” aspect of the feelings that the revolution evokes (an aspect that is connected with the prospect of utility of the coming new order), on the one hand, and the fundamentally different aspect of this feeling – the tension that results from the moral idea of the “absolute good,” on the other hand. By contrast, to rely solely on the *actors* of the revolution who the audience

is supposed to completely identify with – as it happens in Vertov’s film – means to betray the revolutionary potential of realization of political freedom.

It is by this operation of identifying spectators with participants that Vertov’s film loses its *political* quality and becomes indistinguishable from mere agitation. To put this problem in Kantian terms, what occurs here is the collapse of the distinction between “moral politician” and “political moralist.” When the status of observers is lost, then observation becomes part of the aesthetic production in such a way that the latter does not aim at truth but claims itself to be true, to be the *reality* of the revolution. By watching the films the spectators merge with a utopian social practice.

At a closer look, however, it appears that this consequence clearly *betrays* the very principle of Vertov’s “Kino-eye.” The gaze of the “Kino-eye” becomes *reflective* only as it forces us to *distance* ourselves from the everyday by virtue of images that open up the possibility for new modes of perception. If there are moments of political “truth” in art then they lie in opening up this potential to overcome any fixed or pre-shaped structures of thought, in inviting the viewers to see differently. This is what the technique of dialectical montage initially stands for. Once the distance between production and reception

collapses, we find ourselves in the agitating propaganda that is only capable to generate pseudo-generalities of images saturated with emotions and meaning, – images that foreclose possibilities of human emancipation. From the avant-garde project we seem to have been relocated into a new trajectory – a trajectory that leads to a blind future of socialist realism.

TATJANA SHEPLYAKOVA

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## FILMOGRAPHY DETAILS: A SIXTH PART OF THE WORLD

*A Sixth Part of the World. A Kino-Eye Race around the USSR: Export and Import by the State Trading Organization of the USSR* (Shestaia chast’ mira. Probeg Kino-Glaza po SSSR: Eksport i Import Gostorga SSSR)

A film poem.

6 reels. 1718 metres.

Produced by Goskino (Kultkino), Moscow, and Sovkino, Moscow, 1926.

Released 31 December 1926.

Author-Leader: Dziga Vertov

Assistant Director: Elizaveta Svilova.

Assistant to the Author-Leader and Chief Cameraman: Mikhail Kaufman.

Cameramen: Ivan Beliakov, Samuil Bendersky, Petr Zotov, Nikolai Konstantinov, Aleksandr Lemberg, Nikolai Strukov, Iakov Tolchan.

Film Reconnaissance: Abram Kagarlitsky, Ilya Kopolin, Boris Kudinov.

[Taken from: “Vertov’s Silent Films: An Annotated Filmography,” in *Lines of Resistance*, p. 408]