

Schopenhauerian pity evoked by his commentator are thus not irrelevant. The objectivity of the camera is only linked to the arbitrariness of the subject the photographer chooses by identifying this subject with the metonymy of a world, at a singular moment that condenses its speed and its slowness. The objectivity of photography is the regime of thought, perception and sensation that makes the love of pure forms coincide with the apprehension of the inexhaustible historicity found at every street corner, in every skin fold, and at every moment of time.

## 13. Seeing Things Through Things

*Moscow, 1926*

And it is not only in its formal achievements, not only because *A Sixth Part of the World* is a new word in cinema, the victory of fact over invention, that this film is valuable.

It has managed, perhaps for the first time, to show all at once the whole sixth part of the world; it has found the words to force us to be amazed, to feel the whole power, and strength, and unity; it has managed to infect the viewer too with lofty emotion, to throw him onto the screen.

In the dusty steppes there are herds of goats. In the polar snow, where you find no traces of people for hundreds of miles, the Zyriane graze herds of deer. In the towns there is the noise of machines, thousands and thousands of machines, and the fires of the illuminated advertisements burn. In the Far North, at Matochkin Shar, Samoyeds sit on the shore and look at the sea. Once a year, the steamer of the State Trading Organization comes here, bringing dogs, building materials, cloth and the news of the world of the Soviets and Lenin, and takes away furs ...

Along the rails of the thousand-kilometre-long lines, trains take the goods; ice-breakers cut through the frozen ice of the Baltic Sea with their breasts.

And all of this is like some fantastical phenomenon – one thing dissolves into another; you see all things and through things; you see sands, and through sands, polar owls and a single skier going off into the snows; you see yourself, sitting in the cinema watching people in the North eating raw venison, dipping it into still steaming-warm blood.

Was this not a miracle! You shave every other day, you go to the theatre, you ride on a bus – you stand on the other end of the cultural ladder – and *A Sixth Part of the World* has somehow managed distinctly and indisputably to link you with these people eating raw meat in the North. It is almost like a phantasmagoria. To look through things, and to see the iron logic, the connection of such things – the common character of which cannot be proved by any demonstration ...

There is no plot in the film, but you sense your emotion growing, you feel yourself becoming more and more enthralled by the unfolding of the concept of 'a sixth part of the world,' being thrown onto the screen, to the Lapps, Uzbeks, and lathes (*stankam*); you feel all this coming down from the screen, into the auditorium and into the town, and becoming close, becoming yours.<sup>1</sup>

Such is the miracle that the critic Ismail Urazov attributed to Dziga Vertov's film in the booklet that accompanied its release. This booklet was clearly made with particular care. Aleksandr Rodchenko was in charge of graphic design. He framed or cut the text with strictly straight horizontal or vertical lines, while leaving space for photographs that show us a Siberian camp, a well-bundled-up nomad, a troupe of black dancers or an indolent woman smoking. What relation is there between the constructivist rigour of the lines geometrically cutting across the page and these representations of primitive ways of life or bourgeois pastimes? This question of formatting is linked, of course, to the basic question: How are we to understand the 'phantasmagoria' displayed here and the 'iron logic' that is affirmed in between images of skiers and reindeer in the snow, Samoyeds watching the sea or hunters poaching in the woods? The perplexity only grows if we know that this film was commissioned by the Central State Trading Organization and had a specific goal: to make the Soviet Foreign Trade Organization known abroad – that is to say, in capitalist countries. No images of this organization's services and the workers involved appear in the film; no explanation is given of its workings. Indeed, the film does

1 Ismail Urazov, 'Shestaia chast mira' (1926); 'A Sixth Part of the World,' transl. Julian Graffy, in Yuri Tsivian, ed., *Lines of Resistance: Dziga Vertov and the Twenties* (Pordenone: Le Giornate del Cinema Muto, 2004), p. 185. Most of the texts used in this chapter are taken from this masterful anthology.

show products prepared for export and their routing methods. But the fruits of the Crimean – sheep's wool from the Asiatic steppes and Siberian furs – hardly leave us with a grandiose image of Soviet production. And when it comes to means of transportation, dog sleds and caravans appear as often as trains or cargo ships.

And yet, the filmmaker does not feel he has undermined the commission in order to serve artistic intentions. On the contrary, he thinks he has given it full impact by showing not the services of a state agency but the living whole of which it is an organ. Urazov emphasizes this further: the filmmaker wanted to show 'the country as a whole, a sixth part of the world, a real living body, a single organism, and not only a political unit'.<sup>2</sup> But he wanted to show it *in the language of cinema*. This language, Vertov would specify discussing his next film, has three characteristics: it is the language of the eye, designed to be perceived and thought about visually; it is the language of documentary, the language of facts noted down on film; and it is the language of socialism, the language of the 'Communist deciphering of the seen world'.<sup>3</sup> One must fully understand what 'language' means here. Cinematic language is not a tool available to illustrate an idea with images or to translate a message into sensible forms. Vertov does not intend to illustrate the slogans of Soviet economic policies for the use of a defined public. He intends to show the sixth part of the world to itself, and thus to constitute it as a whole. But this does not mean showing Soviets images of Soviet life. This means: extending the living fact of their connection through all their activities. Cinema is a language in the sense that it puts elements into communication. But these elements are facts and actions. And it can do so to the extent that it is itself an autonomous practice, working with the sensible facts of Soviet life, treating them like materials that it organizes to construct forms of perception for a new sensible world.

'Seeing things through things': the idea of a new form of communication is linked to the credo that dominated the politico-artistic avant-garde of the Russian revolution: the time has passed for works of art, for dramatists who told stories, and painters who represented characters or landscapes intended for a public for whom

2 'A Sixth Part of the World', p. 185.

3 'Speech at a Discussion of the Film *The Eleventh Year at the ARK*', in *Lines of Resistance*, p. 290.

the misfortunes of princesses or the labours of peasants were so many embodiments of beauty. Breaking with this world of art does not entail representing 'new life' by illustrating the slogans of Soviet power and by substituting heroic workers for the sentimental heroes of yesterday. It means no more representation. But this does not imply that one has to produce abstract painting. Portraits of heroic workers or abstract portraits are still paintings. And the problem is how no longer to make any, no longer to create objects meant for a specific sphere of production and consumption named 'art'. Revolutionary artists do not make revolutionary art. They do not make art at all. This does not mean there is no art in what they do. They use their art – that is to say, their consciousness of the new goals of life and their practical savoir-faire – to develop materials to make things, material elements of the new life. This is the credo that was particularly developed by the artists named constructivists, who furnished Vertov with a few of his main ideas, and for some time believed they had found in him the filmmaker capable of carrying their flag. A film is not a matter of putting a story into images meant to move hearts or to satisfy artistic sense. It is primarily a thing, and a thing made with materials that are worthwhile on their own. This is the principle Vertov adopts: no acted cinema, not even – certainly not – cinema where actors would replace the sentimental heroes of yesterday with revolutionaries or builders of the new world to exalt new proletarian energies, instead of old bourgeois emotions. Only a cinema of the fact. But neither is this a cinema that represents the real. If constructivists include Vertov's *Kino-journal*, Tatlin's architecture, Popova and Stepanova's printed fabrics, or posters by Mayakovski and Rodchenko among the *things* that must now replace works and images of yesterday, this is because Vertov does not simply want to film facts. He wants to organize them into a film-thing that itself contributes to constructing the fact of the new life. He reverses the common opinion that treats the newsreel as a simple tool of information about brute reality or propaganda at the service of external ends, as opposed to the autonomy and inventive potential of the art film. It is in supposedly autonomous art that procedures of artistic construction become pure means. The art film, the film with a script, meant for the pleasure of aficionados or the emotion of sensitive souls, makes the camera into a mere instrument at the service of an external end. It effectively subordinates the

montage of shots and sequences to the illustrative needs of the plot. On the other hand, 'the newsreel ceases to be illustrative material reflecting this or that place in our many-sided contemporary life, and becomes contemporary life as such, outside of territories, time, or individual significance'.<sup>4</sup> The camera gains its autonomy when it plunges into the middle of facts to make them its own thing, and to make this thing an element of social construction. The choice is not between two kinds of art. It is between two sensible worlds: the old one in which art was the name by which writers, artists, sculptors or filmmakers put their practice at the service of a particular consumption, and the new one by which they make things that enter directly into production in common, which is the production of common life.

Film thus organizes facts. It organizes them in the form of a proper language, a language of the visible that puts them in communication. But the application of constructivist principles to the cinema soon proved ambiguous. The generative image of constructivism remained, in effect, the raw material that production transformed into an object, be it an abstract 'counter-relief', a printed fabric, a public monument or the equipment of a workers' club. The promotion of productive action implies the depreciation of an art devoted solely to the production of visual forms. But cinema has no raw material other than the image. *A Sixth Part of the World* does not work the wool or linen, but 'organizes' images of sheep herds that farmers bathe in a river, linen spinners, or machine turbines filmed by cameramen sent to the different parts of the young Union of Soviet Republics. Its material is composed of facts recorded in the form of visual images. Its organizing work consists in connecting images that represent heterogeneous material activities: wheat-threshing, the pistons of machines, a ship breaking through the ice, reindeer pulling sleds in the snow, a record turning on a phonograph, a moving train, rowers on a river, spectators in a cinema, and thousands of other activities. But this sensible connection cannot be an illustrated explanation of the organization of Soviet trade. It must be the sensible conjunction of all activities into a directly given whole. In this sense, it is essential for the film that these activities be as distant as possible from each other – distant in their materiality,

4 Aleksei Gan, 'The Tenth Kino-Pravda', *Kino-fot 4* (1922), in *Lines of Resistance*, p. 55.

their location, and their very temporality: the reindeer breeders who eat raw flesh, Samoyeds who see the ship dock once a year to pick up furs, or the caravans at the borders of China must be immediately and visibly united to the metal workers or the pedestrians of Nevsky prospect.

Making the community visible means exposing two of its main features: one is the relatedness of all activity to all others; the other, their similarity. These two features do not necessarily go together. An economy can be shown as the global unity of heterogeneous activities. This is what the film does when it follows the paths that go from the breeders in the steppes and the Siberian hunters to the Leipzig fairs, via the ports of the Black Sea or the Arctic Ocean and the icebreaker that clears the way for ships. But the sensible interconnection of activities is primarily the relation of their visible manifestations. The old pedagogy of schoolbooks followed the route of wheat or wool from sowing or pasture to table or clothing. By contrast, here a product's journey from its origin to its final destination counts less than the link established by the montage of activities unconnected by any logic of cause and effect: the sirens of the steamers that announce the loading of wheat sacks and the *zurna* that announces village dances, the herds crossing rivers and the lemons that stack themselves in a crate, whose cover magically closes, before it jumps to the top of the pile on its own. What unites these activities is their shared capacity to be reduced to fragments in order to be intertwined with one another. This is what the Stenberg brothers' poster for *Man with a Movie Camera* symbolizes: this dancer whose ease at projecting herself into space is due to the very separation of her limbs. The fragmentation of montage can resemble a Taylorist division of labour from afar. But this is a *trompe-l'oeil* analogy. The principle of Vertovian montage is not the fracturing of tasks into *n* number of complementary operations. It is the simultaneous presentation of normally impossible activities. It is, in this sense, faithful to the cubist and futurist explosion of surfaces that presents not only different sides of the same object, but the dynamism of collective forms that cuts across any particular activity.

The unity of a collective dynamism can be expressed by the double exposure that puts labour, sowing and harvest on the same screen, or projects an aerial view of Leningrad on the sidewalk of Nevsky

Prospect. It does so more commonly through the speed of montage that cuts documentary material into as many fragments as it is necessary to unite and sweep away all these elements in a shared rhythm: the feet dancing to the rhythm of the *zurna* and those stomping laundry clean; the hands of peasants bundling linen into sheaves and the hunter's hands drawing his bow; the breeder's movement bathing his sheep in the waves and the spectators applauding his image. Even when Vertov follows the order that goes from the wheat harvest to the loading of grain on ships, the sequence of complementary activities counts less than the equivalence given to the rhythm of the reaping machine and the hands handling pitchforks, and to the sacks that slide down ramps, are loaded on dockworkers' backs and carried onto ships. The same dynamism drives the spinning machines and the effort of the Kalmyk fishermen pulling their nets, the wheels of the freight trains, the camel or reindeer caravans across the steppes or the tundra, the wheat falling into the ship holds, a flock of seagulls above the Black Sea, the swirling current of the sea, or the waterfall that feeds an electric power station on the Volga. The principle of montage is to establish a community of equivalent movements. Each sequence presents bodies in motion. Among his projects, Vertov had planned a film about hands: 127 possible hand gestures, from the most trivial to the most meaningful. The film was never made, but it is this principle of equivalence between forms and visible movements that governs the 'language' of montage, and not any linguistic articulation of differences.

The problem is that all gestures whose intertwining constitutes human societies in general are thus susceptible to being rendered equivalent. A critic emphasized this: with this device, nothing would be easier than representing the American nation as the land of communism in action. The similarity of gestures is communist only if it is set against a difference. The first section of *A Sixth Part of the World* strives to create this difference by showing the capitalist world in decline. But how can one show this decline through the activity of Krupp factories? The intertitles involuntarily betray the aporia of the attempt: 'more and more machines', they tell us before adding, 'but it is not less hard for the worker'. Unfortunately, nothing distinguishes the image of capitalist machines from Soviet machines, nor the work of a German metalworker from that of a Ukrainian metalworker. To mark the difference between the two systems, one has

to show the relation between the old world and its shadowy underbelly: on the one hand, a group of the leisure class filmed in a salon where they smoke, drink tea, toy with a necklace, or dance to the sound of a record player; on the other, their black 'slaves' who work in the plantations or are drafted into colonial troops – the immediate visual contrast of inside and outside, costume and semi-nudity, leisure and forced labour. But the opposition is blurred when the idle put on their furs to go and see the show performed by the black dancers. A close-up on a trombone slide introduces the rhythm of an orchestra and a dance that carries along the gestures of the idle in the equality of their exact movements. The musicians' virtuosity even annuls the aggressive kitsch of the Negro costumes. And the montage erases the difference it was supposed to accentuate. Thus the words of the intertitles must show the difference, which is not expressed by the simple visible fact or the rhythm of organized facts. The enlargement of an intertitle occupying the entire screen thus comes to attest to the added difficulty of the workers' labour, and the underlined word *verge* visualizes the fact that Capital is on the verge of collapse. Just as images must stop being representations of things to figure the dynamism of their movement, words must stop naming and describing. They must act as conductors of movements themselves.

The use of words as visual elements corresponds to the 'cubo-futurist' tradition from which Vertov's former constructivist friends borrowed this element. In 1922, their theoretician Aleksei Gan celebrated the innovation that he attributed to Rodchenko: the introduction of dynamic intertitles in *Kino-Pravda* number 13, such as a LENIN occupying the whole screen: a screen-word he said, a word stretched like 'an electric cord, like a conductor through which the screen feeds on shining reality'.<sup>5</sup> *A Sixth Part of the World* is composed of 272 cords of this kind, stretched across the screen according to various spatial distributions, gaps and sizes. From the beginning, there is an enormous VIZHU ('I see') that fills the screen and commands, with the inventory of ethnic groups and their activities, the incessant address to a YOU, a YOU ALL and an ALL called to collectively recognize themselves as owners of ALL the shared richness, until the very images are interrupted, leaving room

<sup>5</sup> Aleksei Gan, 'The Thirteenth Experiment', *Kino-fot* 5 (10 December 1922), in *Lines of Resistance*, p. 56.

for the crescendo of words, each of which occupies an entire screen, to affirm that all are together masters of the Soviet land (VY/VSE/KHOZYAYEVA/SOVETSKOY/ZEMLI) – a declaration saluted by the hands of enthusiastic spectators, immediately followed by a new visual crescendo, in four shots and enormous letters, affirming that the hands of all hold a sixth part of the world. The 'main cord' of filmic materiality, which binds hands to hands in order to link each to all, now begins to split into two functions. First, it identifies with the graphic movement of letters. They behave as visual forms to fuse their movements with the waves and turbines, ships and crowds; but also, and above all, to insist on the difference that the latter cannot express: no close-up will ever contain a marching crowd, but a close-up can contain the three fully radiant letters in BCE ('all') or the four in MIRA ('world'). But, at the same time, the visual dynamism of the letters takes on the role of the voice, which at times accompanies images with its obsessive refrain. At others, the voice swells to affirm the power, in four cymbal blows, of what the images show without ever sufficiently saying it: the spiritual power that animates the whole.

Thus the letters must provide the force of the link for which the montage, which links fragments into a whole, does not suffice. They do so at the price of being both material forms – visual facts taken up in the movement of all the visual facts gathered by the camera – and the voice that comes to give these visual facts their 'organization' – that is to say, primarily, their tone and their rhythm. But this double nature of words only creates heterogeneity in the similarity of facts and movements to reinforce the double doubt, to which the idea of the language of facts is vulnerable: an impressionistic lyricism that wants to follow the unitary music of facts to the detriment of their articulated meaning; and an artifice that transforms their material reality into symbolic language. Vertov built his enterprise on a simple alternative: either one has the art film, the 'acted drama' imitating the theatre of the past, or else the organization of documentary facts. Critics did not take long to reply that his alternative was untenable and led to an incessant oscillation between two poles. Either facts without art – that is, without organization – or else art, in the sense of artifice: montage tricks forcefully imposed on facts. And they were not hard-pressed to prove that both paths, the fetishism of facts and montage, led to a particular form of

the same sin against the new civilization: aestheticism, or art for art's sake.

On the first side, the critical tone was soon given by the one who represented the antithesis of the Vertovian project in cinema, the former theatre director become Soviet propagandist, Sergei Eisenstein. Eisenstein had not hesitated to use actors to play 1905 strikers or revolutionaries, going so far as using slaughterhouse scenes in *The Strike* to compensate for the inability of his extras actually to get killed by the bullets of the Tsarist police. Vertov and his partisans considered the skilful montage of *The Strike* or *Battleship Potemkin* to have been borrowed from their methods, and thus to confirm their thesis: if he wanted to encompass the problems of Soviet Russia instead of transposing theatre techniques to the screen, Eisenstein had to borrow the forms of the film-thing developed by *Kino-Pravda* – the composition of a distinctly visual sense through the montage of independent fragments, the use of close-ups and intertitles as dynamic visual elements. Eisenstein's response was simple: he did not at all attempt to organize facts visually; he wanted to organize the emotions that the assemblage of visual elements was meant to arouse in the spectators. The camera is not a means to realize the unanimist dream, 'the combined vision of millions of eyes'; it is, according to the formula he repeats tirelessly, 'a tractor ploughing over the audience's psyche in a particular class context'.<sup>6</sup> The plot of yesterday must not be followed by the language of facts, but rather by the montage of attractions – namely, the elements calculated to produce effects on minds directly, which used to pass through the representation of the actions and emotions of fictional characters. It is not a matter of escaping art, but of rationalizing it as the exact calculation of emotions to be produced and the means for producing them. Soviet cinema does not need a *Kino-eye* but a *Kino-fist*. By rejecting 'artistic cinema', Vertov and his 'Kinoc' friends rejected the basis of all art that is the calculation of ends and the adaptation of means to these ends. From this point of view, the problem is not to film 'real facts' rather than invented ones, or the present realities of industry rather than the facts of yesterday:

6 S. M. Eisenstein, 'The Problem of the Materialist Approach to Film', in *Selected Works*, vol. I, *Writings 1922–1934*, transl. and ed. Richard Taylor (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 62.

What will be decisive today *for emotional purposes* – extra aesthetic machines ... or the nightingale of our grandmothers – this is purely a question of the calendar. If today the strongest response in the audience is aroused by symbols and comparisons with machines, we film the 'heartbeats' in the machine room of the battleship, but if, tomorrow, the day before yesterday's false nose and rouge come back to replace them, we shall go over to the rouge and false noses.<sup>7</sup>

Eisenstein thus reverses the alternative. To denounce artistic work that focuses on producing impressions as old-fashioned bourgeois trash is to condemn oneself to producing the most bourgeois art – the art of artists who note their impressions and translate their emotions. The Kinocs following the shepherds of Kyrgyzstan or the Siberian hunters clearly wanted to compete with the cinematic poems that Robert Flaherty devoted to *Nanook the Eskimo*, or the Polynesians of *Moana*. But their practice also recalls a distinctly Russian tradition – that of the so-called ambulant painters who, in the last century, travelled across the deep countryside with their easels and their sketchbooks to capture the life of the people as they passed by. In lieu of organizing facts, they only propose pantheistic surrender before the 'cosmic pressure' of things. The will to express the dynamism shared by multiple manifestations of life leads to a purely aesthetic montage. It merely mixes everything on screen better to leave it intact in real life.

This is the conclusion hammered home by the opponents of a film whose economic and ideological profitability was inversely proportional to its cost of production. They denounced devotion to the facts as the pure aestheticism of art photography:

He films things, the animal and plant world, machines, everything – only in a 'pose' and from an angle from which it looks more beautiful, more interesting and more attractive. This is the admiration of phenomena without purpose. So he shows you a man in the North. Snow. And against this background a figure in black, walking off somewhere into the endless lyrical distance ... The man and his shadow in the snow. Is this not a shot from a good feature film?<sup>8</sup>

7 S. M. Eisenstein, 'Letter to the editor of *Film Technik*', 26 February 1927, in *Lines of Resistance*, p. 146.

8 P. Krasnov, *Uchitelskaia gazeta*, 5 February 1927, in *Lines of Resistance*, p. 208.

This aesthetic tailism towards phenomena is clearly worsened by the giant intertitles that give the film the tone of a Whitmanian prose poem or a 'Hamsunesque' hymn to nature: "These exclamatory addresses to the sea, to the steppes, to wild animals, as if they were good comrades, sound "Hamsunesque", false in relation to the principles by which the film itself has been constructed ... The point is not "good relations" with nature, but using it, subduing it through enormous human energy." The aesthetic mistake is a political mistake: the will to show the Soviet Union as a real living body attracted attention to the geographic dispersion of ethnicities, and their ways of life, more than to the economic unity of work forces and means of production. Above all it led to a privileging of immemorial nature – vast snowy banks, deserted Siberian shores, taiga or the endless steppe, herds of reindeer and buffalo – and to an age-old population – hunters in the snow, nomad breeders, yurt-dwellers, caravan drivers, but also men eating raw flesh, veiled women, men prostrated in mosques, shamans and sorcerers in the throes of exorcism dances ... How are we supposed to admit the grandiloquent intertitles telling these men who play polo with goat carcasses and bow before divinity that they are the owners of the Soviet land? How are we to render equal all the activities scattered across the territory when it falls upon the organized proletariat and their Party to impose the economic reality of communism through socialist education in state companies and cooperatives? Communism is not a matter of sheep, reindeer and pigs, and it is not made with the servants of old religious idols.

Vertov thought he had responded to the criticism in his next film, *The Eleventh Year*, with a double manoeuvre: he reduced the intertitles to the modest and uniform size of simple information. And he left behind the sled teams of the Far North and the spectacular *contre-jour* on the infinite waves to celebrate the colossal work on the Dnieper hydro-electric station; the electrification of the countryside, mines and blast furnaces, power plants, metal factories or battleships, and the crowds gathered in Red Square. But the criticism shifted almost immediately: composing visual poems to the glory of machines was still the fetishism of aesthetes. Machines do not need to be admired, only used. And the first step is knowing what they are

9 Osip Beskin, 'Shestaia chast mira', *Sovetskoe kino* 6/7 (1926), in *Lines of Resistance*, p. 205.

used for. Now the alternation between group and detail shots, the superimpositions that expose the machines' inner workings on the worker's attentive face – or the contrary – teach us nothing about this. This applies as much to the turbines of power plants and blast furnaces as it does to dog sled teams or flocks of seagulls. The camera still celebrates them as things, as phenomena without purpose, uniting them as equivalent, abstract movements. It must show not the inner working of machines, but the people that make them work, the 'living people, authentic builders of the new life',<sup>10</sup> these concrete men of flesh and blood, with their effort and their problems, that official doctrine would soon promote in order to silence the bothersome avant-garde artists, abstract lovers of machines, and inventors of new languages incomprehensible to Soviet workers.

Here is the other pendant of criticism. The passivity that records the sled races of the Far North and the turbines of electric stations with equal pantheist exaltation goes with 'formalist' artifice, which fragments images to its liking to compose an extravagant symphony of gestures or machines. The artifice is already present in the presentation of these facts supposedly recorded by the objectivity of the camera-eye. Indeed, according to critics, it is clear that the bourgeois dancing the fox-trot who illustrate the old capitalist mode were not surprised by the camera in the privacy of their apartment. These are not facts recorded by a Kino-eye, but scenes of fiction specially acted before the camera for the needs of visual demonstration. But even when the author is content to combine the documentary material filmed by Kinocs, his montage compromises its reality. What about this peasant's wife we see with the exact same grin in the Ukrainian countryside watching an electrician install a wire, and in Red Square in a counter-shot to an official speech? Or the pianist's hands interlaced with dancers' legs and machine levers? Or the harbour crane or the reindeer convoy that change, without leaving us any time to know how, into scissors shearing sheep's wool, immediately transformed into fruit crates, which fade into steamers cutting through waves? 'Organized' facts are facts made dubious, absorbed by montage *tricks* which work as sleights of hand. The law of *either ... or ...* cannot fail to apply to the spectator who has seen the lemons pile themselves into crates:

10 Anonymous, 'Odinnadtsatyi', *Molot*, 26 June 1928, in *Lines of Resistance*, p. 307.

Either the viewer will seriously believe that in our country fruit pack themselves in some miraculous way without the intervention of hands or machines. Or, guessing that this is a joke, the viewer will ask himself: but the loading of cows onto a steamship with a crane – is that not a joke? And all those Eskimos, Dagestanis, and so forth – are they not film actors in disguises and make-up? Let's have one thing: either a race by Kino-Eye through real life, or the tricks of animation.<sup>11</sup>

But the followers of popular common sense are not the only ones who invoke the 'fiction or reality' alternative to protect the defenceless spectator. Vertov's former avant-gardist and constructivist allies themselves cast doubt on the very principle of organization of facts through montage. Osip Brik presented the objection in its most rigorous form: a documentary fact is an individual fact that takes place once and once alone, at a given date and time. Its presentation is understandable and complete in itself. This holds, for instance, for the sequence filmed by the cameraman who followed the herd of reindeer. But, in the editing room where material from the four corners of the Soviet land comes together, the reindeer sequence was cut into pieces to be reassembled with other documentary sequences for logical comparison and lyrical intensification. Their images are no longer representations of documentary facts; yet they have not become abstract signs of a language either. Brik draws a conclusion that seems directly drawn from the pages in Hegel on the aporias of symbolic art:

Instead of a real deer, we get a deer as a symbolic sign with a vague conventional meaning. But since these deer were filmed without any thought about their possible use as conventional signs, their real nature as deer has resisted this turning them into symbols, and as a result we get neither a deer nor a sign, but a blank space.<sup>12</sup>

By wanting to assemble a film from sequences suitable for news-reel, Dziga Vertov fell into the contradiction between documentary material and the art film's own montage methods. Facts became

11 L. Sosnovsky, 'Shestaia chast mira', *Rabochaia Gazeta*, 5 January 1927, in *Lines of Resistance*, p. 222.

12 Osip Brik, 'Against Genre Pictures', *Kino*, 5 July 1927, in *Lines of Resistance*, p. 227.

pure symbols whose emblem is decidedly the skier headed towards an icy unknown, who can only signify the disappearance of the old world at the cost of also symbolizing an endless flight into the bad infinity of the 'language of facts'. In turn, these facts can only signify if they are incessantly joined with other facts of the same or contrary nature.

The general scope of this critique of Vertovian 'symbolism' is noteworthy. Before being an image that embodies an idea, a 'symbol' is the fragment of a broken ring, an element that demands to find its complement. It is thus the very sense of montage, fragmentation and assemblage of documentary facts into a constructed whole that criticism puts into question. The contradiction of the film-form with documentary material is the rupture declared within 'factuality' that the innovators opposed to the old art of pictorial images and dramatic plots. One could work and assemble raw materials or articulate linguistic elements insignificant in themselves. One could create a montage of images or words chosen to make sense in a work of fiction. But there is no montage of facts. They are only so, they can only escape the undifferentiated flux of 'life', if they carry a meaning that individualizes them. And this individualization is lost when one tries to fragment them into elements of a language. Materials are gathered, linguistic elements articulated, but 'facts' cannot be gathered and articulated a posteriori in the form of discourse. From this, Brik and Shklovsky simply concluded upon the necessity of a plan presiding over the filming of the materials. But the consequence of their critique went much further. It questioned the very idea of cinematic montage as the exemplary form of art-become-life. It proposed an alternative: either there is the assemblage of raw materials or the montage of fictional elements. Cinematic 'language' must choose between the narration of facts and the composition of plots, even to discover that there are other plots, other ways of designing plots – intricacies of words and images – than the story of individual lives.

No doubt such a radical diagnosis and challenge can explain the no less radical response offered by the film with which Dziga Vertov's name would remain associated, *Man with a Movie Camera*. To prove that the Kino-eye is a language indeed, the film adopts a radical principal: the removal of intertitles. No doubt, this had already been done by Carl Mayer, screenwriter for Lupu Pick and

Friedrich Murnau. But the absence of words in *The Last Man* was compensated for by the legibility of a story of social decline that Carl Mayer had even cut into acts. Like Walter Ruttmann in *Berlin: Symphony of a Metropolis*, Dziga Vertov adopted the minimal thread of a city described throughout one day. But Ruttmann described the life of one city alone in a continuous thread that began with the arrival of a train in the morning and ended with nocturnal pleasures. On the other hand, Vertov's cinematic city immediately rejects the choice between facts and symbols, using parallel montage to take us from the surroundings of the Bolshoi to the shores of the Black Sea. Later it passes through a gallery of mines in Donbass, taking us from an unlocated hair salon to the Moscow traffic of Tverskaya Street. Critics protested that the unity shown by *A Sixth Part of the World* was not economic or social, but simply geographic. The spatio-temporal unity of *Man with a Movie Camera* is not defined by any geographic territory or historical sequence, but by the cinematographic machine alone. The film insistently announces itself as an experience. The camera is first presented in a close-up as the subject of the film. It is made metaphorical, doubling in the next shot, where the cameraman and his tripod climb onto the first camera's back, just as, in *The Eleventh Year*, a giant worker becomes the metaphor for the labour of construction workers, who have become ants at his feet. The cameraman then leads us to the movie theatre where the seats repeat the trick of the lemon crates by automatically folding down when the spectators arrive to see the film. Their unity is made metaphorical by the orchestra, before we finally come to the beginning of the 'day' with a travelling shot towards a window revealing a sleeping woman – none other than the filmmaker's wife and the film editor herself. By the time she wakes up, gets out of bed and washes up, juxtaposed to the water jets washing the city, the camera has had the time to splice the images of the lying body with a restaurant table revealing a close-up of a bottle, a kiosk providing a glimpse of the neo-Greek columns of the Bolshoi in the background, homeless people sleeping on benches that visually rhyme with cribs – setting off a series of visual rhymes between the automaton using a sewing machine in a shop window and an automaton riding a bike, a bus-stop and a carriage, an abacus and an elevator, a typewriter keyboard and a telephone, a smokestack and a car radiator grill, cars driving in the street and pigeons frolicking on the cornice,

the movement of the train and the crank of the cameraman filming them, and many other activities. Among these, at times, there playfully appears a poster for an 'art film', *The Awakening of a Woman*, a fictive awakening that rhymes with nothing but itself. A critic of *A Sixth Part of the World* complained about seeing a speaker appear on stage only to be entirely swallowed by the enormous wheel of an unidentified machine. But in *Man with a Movie Camera*, it is the camera and the editor's scissors that we see incessantly swallowing each sequence of everyday life, in an accelerated rhythm, to join fragments to equivalent fragments of any other activity that the camera has shot in order to give them a new life, a life that is its own work. The complementarity of actions is reduced more than ever to their similarity, and the struggle of new against old is blurred even more radically than in the fox-trot sequence from *A Sixth Part of the World*. No doubt one can recognize a 'Nepwoman' in the joyful woman getting her hair and nails done in a beauty parlour, and oppose her foaming shampoo to the mortar mixed by a worker and a housewife's laundry detergent, just as the sharpening of a lumberjack's axe is contrasted with a barbershop razor. But her smile does not differ from that of the young female worker in the tobacco plant. And the opposition of actions is also their similarity. First, the active hands of the hairdresser or the manicurist are linked to the active hands of the worker and the housewife, or those of a shoe-shiner, before rhyming with the hands of the editor scraping the film, just as the hairdryer does with the cameraman's crank, in a movement that fuses what follows into an accelerated montage: a sowing machine and a dressmaker's hand holding a needle, an abacus, the crank of a cash register, a rotary printer, the hand of a worker folding packing paper on a lathe, a telephone exchange, cigarettes ready to be packed, a telephone, a typewriter and a piano keyboard, the line where cigarettes are packed, a pick-axe attacking the beams of a mine, a horse drawing a wagon in the gallery, the editing table, a blast furnace, metal in fusion, the camera, the waterfall from a dam, the pod that bears the camera into the air above the waterfall, buses driving both ways on a street split by superimposition, a policeman's gesture switching the traffic signals, a horn, and various mechanisms making who knows what, but which simply draw the cameraman and his tripod along in their movement.

The opposition between the elegant 'Nepwoman' and the working woman of the people is thus similar to that between couples who go to the town hall to get married and those who go there to get divorced. It is swept up in the universal dance that makes all activities equal to each other. Cinematographic communism is this generalized and accelerated equivalence of all movements. Hence the filmmaker does not fear provocation: in response to the accusation, repeated a hundred times, of wallowing in magic tricks, he ostensibly allegorized his work in a sequence, taken from an earlier film, that shows us children astonished by a Chinese magician's tricks. Through equally ostentatious tricks, he shows us his cameraman perched on top of a building before making him pop up in a beer mug. Some suspicious 'Nepmen' are the ones drinking that beer. But in the Lenin club, where it goes next, the camera shows the honest pastimes of chess players and newspaper readers, only to switch suddenly to pursue new charms: a man playing music with metal spoons on a pot lid attracts the attention of the joyful spectators, setting off a crescendo of thirty-five shots and reverse-shots in twenty-five seconds before the spoon dance, the hands of a pianist and a spectator's radiant face flash together superimposed, thus preparing the spectators – those watching the film and those it shows us – for the new magic trick that will have the cinema as its theatre: the tripod introduces itself and takes a bow, then the camera emerges from its box and screws itself into place, before ceremoniously saluting the audience it will take on new visual adventures.

This bravura greeting that proclaims the power of the Kino-eye and the montage that assembles images more than ever, undoubtedly ignores the fact that it is also the closing ceremony. Proudly claiming to be a film without a plot, actors or intertitles, *The Man with a Movie Camera* asserts itself as the apex of a decade of work, the crowning experiment in a 'universal language of images', constituting the sensible fabric of a new world. But when the film was released in Moscow in 1929, it had already been a year since the voice of *The Jazz Singer* had put an end to the dream of a universal language of visual forms. No doubt Vertov knew how to adapt to the novelty of sound cinema and proclaim that the combined language of sounds and images was the fulfilment of the search for a new language. *Enthusiasm* made the slogans of the Five-Year Plan and the pledges of elite workers resonate through images. The noise

of felled steeples and radio voices drowning out liturgical chants clearly affirmed the conflict between two worlds, thus erasing any trace of the unanimism of which *A Sixth Part of the World* was accused. But the medium of recorded sound was primarily used, naturally, by those who demanded that the 'formalist' exercises of belated constructivists or surrealists be replaced by films capable of showing the condition and the problems of real, living people who were building the new country, and of distracting them from their efforts. Between the release of *The Eleventh Year* and *Man with a Movie Camera*, the Party Conference, in charge of restoring order to the Babel of Soviet cinema, adopted the watchword that would henceforth assign filmmakers their task: 'the main criterion for evaluating the formal and artistic qualities of films is the requirement that cinema furnish a "form that is intelligible to the millions".'<sup>13</sup> In order to get closer to the masses, whose condition and needs they ignored all too often, filmmakers had carefully to join 'experiences of an intimate and psychological character' to artistic and ideological coherence.<sup>14</sup> With sound film, the 'acted drama' of yesterday was not only well armed to make a comeback, but also to impose itself decisively as the art of those building the socialist future.

13 Party Cinema Conference Resolution (15–21 March 1928), in Taylor and Christie, *Film Factory*, p. 212.

14 Anatoli Lunacharsky, 'Speech to Film Workers', *Zhizn' iskusstva* 4 (24 January 1928), in Taylor and Christie, *Film Factory*, p. 197.