Chapter Three

The Beating Pulse of Living Life: Musical, Futurist, and Newsreel Matrices (1916-1918)

Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of a crowd,
Just as you are refresh’d by the gladness of the river and the bright flow, I was refresh’d,
Just as you stand and lean on the rail, yet hurry with the swift current, I stood yet was hurried,
Just as you look on the numberless masts of ships and the thick-stemm’d pipes of steamboats, I look’d.

-- Walt Whitman, “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”

In a remarkable revisionary study of Western European culture after World War One, the historian Jay Winter has argued that the dominant responses to the War were not in that iconoclastic, critical, ironic mode that has come to be thought of (and canonized) as “modernist” – or as “modern memory,” to use Paul Fussell’s phrase, which might characterize artists as different as George Grosz, Blaise Cendrars, and T.S. Eliot – but rather involved a turn to traditional vocabularies of representation, above all as a way of dealing with the unheard-of human losses brought about by the War:

[T]he enduring appeal of many traditional motifs [during and after World War One] – defined as an eclectic set of classical, romantic, or religious images and ideas – is directly related to the universality of bereavement in the Europe of the Great War and its aftermath. The strength of what may be termed “traditional” forms in social and cultural life, in art, poetry and ritual, lay in their power to mediate bereavement. The cutting edge of “modern memory,” its multifaceted sense of dislocation, paradox, and the ironic, could express anger and despair, and did so in enduring ways; it was melancholic, but it could not heal . . . There is considerable evidence of the power of traditional modes of commemoration within communities [after the War], from small groups of men and women in family circles, to séances, to those gathered in more conventional forms of
relational worship, to universities, ex-servicemen’s associations, widows’ organizations, to communities unveiling war memorials, and finally, to the “imagined community” of the nation itself.

[T]he backward gaze of so many writers, artists, politicians, soldiers, and everyday families in this period reflected the universality of grief and mourning in Europe from 1914. . . . The “sites of memory,” like [Walter] Benjamin’s Angelus Novus, faced the past, not the future.¹

Winter does not discuss Russia and its empire, but we might surmise, considering how war in those territories dilated from 1914 until 1921, that cultural conditions there would be especially ripe for the emergence (or persistence) of traditional forms of memorialization.

The Russian Empire saw five million war casualties between 1914 and 1917 alone, more than any other combatant nation, and six million made refugees by war prior to February 1917. Soviet Russia saw another million dead either in combat or by falling victim to terror during the Civil War; millions more perishing during the same conflict due to disease or starvation; at least another million gone through flight or exile; five million dying in the famine of 1921; and millions of children made homeless or orphaned.² There was and would be much to mourn, though the scale and character of early Soviet commemoration, distinguished by (among other features) its official anti-

¹ Jay Winter, Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European cultural history (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 5-6, 223. The position against which Winter is arguing is of course Paul Fussell’s in The Great War and Modern Memory (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975).

religious animus, remain little investigated.3 If we look even superficially at much of the most sophisticated Soviet filmmaking of the 1920s – Vertov’s to be sure, but the work of Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Dovzhenko and many others as well – we find frequent corroboration of Winter’s thesis in those decidedly un-“modernist” moments from which viewers often avert their eyes: all the parades, funeral processions, monuments, elegies to the dead Lenin and so on, like Gothic phantasms drifting spectrally and (for us) embarrassingly through those laboratories for advanced cinematic experimentation.

“For us,” indeed. We might wonder how much contradiction Vertov and his contemporaries sensed, when we consider Vertov’s famous film commemorations of Lenin (the 1925 Lenin Kino-Pravda and 1934’s Three Songs of Lenin), or the cover of Lev Kolpakchi’s arch-Constructivist Zrelishcha [Spectacle] for 27 January 1925, titled “To Lenin’s Grave,” where Gan affirmed, in a kind of prose pilgrimage, that Lenin, who wrote little about art but much about revolution and the need to industrialize, could be taken for that reason as defending Constructivism’s anti-art stance.4 (This does not mean that they sensed no contradiction: Vertov, speaking of himself in the third person in 1922, boasted of how, in the more experimental Kino-Pravdas, he managed at least partially to “inter the interments [pokhoronil pokhorony] and the parades of big-wigs.”)5

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Perhaps these bedfellows should not seem strange to us, given the now well-known affiliations that existed between Futurisms of nearly all stripes and various traditionalisms, primitivisms and even regressive authoritarianisms. On the eve of the Russian war effort in 1914, Vertov’s idol Vladimir Mayakovskiy had, after all, embraced the conflict as virtually a Futurist project (he would change his mind soon enough):

Now life has adopted us [the Futurists]. There is no fear. Now we will show you every day that under our yellow buffoons’ jackets were the bodies of healthy, strong men, needed by you as warriors.

At the very least, these features of pre-revolutionary and early Soviet experimental artistic ideology and practice should make us wonder whether a notion like “modernity” – whose range of applicability cannot be expanded indefinitely if it is to retain precision and salience – adequately describes this historical conjuncture. That is (and considering the films exclusively): are the ubiquitous ritual-memorial moments in the films skillful absorptions of older mourning practices into a new, polymorphous “modernity” mediated by cinema, or (as Winter suggests) are they better characterized in terms of the persistence of traditional modes of commemoration into the present, indeed as their partial takeover of the “new” media?

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8 It should be clear that these two perspectives are not compatible, if cinematic “modernity” is to mean anything more than sheer crowding-together of different temporal
As I see it, a key difference between the Russian and West European post-war situations, at least from the perspective of early Soviet culture, lies not in the greater duration and magnitude of the suffering in Russia, but rather in the conjuncture of that suffering with the revolution of 1917 as a historical and ideological threshold. At almost the exact midpoint of the catastrophe, Russia became the site—at least for some of those, like Vertov, of revolutionary conviction—of a world-historical victory, the triumph of the proletariat. As we will see, Vertov seemed not to share that conviction in 1918; like many others, he did share it by 1922, and there can be no doubt but that it provided a fundamental support, when compounded with his existing enthusiasm for advanced contemporary art, for his attempts to imagine and create a cinema that at once would be of a piece with the new world augured by the revolution, and would help to bring that world into being. (The more prosaic fact that he ended up working for the Bolshevik regime, that it became the concrete framework for his own advancement, was no less significant, as we will see.) Yet his aspirations were conditioned through and through by the reality around him—apprehensible as either crippling poverty or a tabula rasa; as wracked by terrifying violence or as energized by revolutionary will—and by the efforts or historical levels within a given medium-practice; or indeed to be distinguished from the most unhelpful truisms about the functions of “media” as such. The issue is a difficult one that raises numerous questions about periodization and the interrelating of levels of focus (historical, formal, biographical) within interpretation. For contrasting views, see Tom Gunning, “The Whole Town’s Gawking: Early Cinema and the Visual Experience of Modernity,” Yale Journal of Criticism 7.2 (Fall 1994): 189-201; and David Bordwell, Figures Traced in Light: On Cinematic Staging (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 244-249. For Winter’s own superb discussion of Abel Gance’s 1919 film J’accuse—“in which the dead arise and return home to see if their sacrifice has been in vain . . . [using] the most ‘modern’ techniques . . . to present ancient motifs and images about sacrifice, death and resurrection,” see Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning, 5-7, 15-17, 18-22, 119-142; here 6-7.
of the regime to “build socialism,” and to build itself as a regime, in those conditions and in its own way.

Following Vertov’s life trajectory, this chapter and the next chart the early stages of that building, from the months immediately prior to February 1917 through the beginning of 1922, by which time Dziga Vertov (rather than David Kaufman) had become a significant if not yet renowned participant in a still-embryonic Soviet cinema culture. It is a complex story, whose telling involves attending to the mutual actions and reactions of history, ideology, and creative personality, and whose leitmotif is the co-emergence, nowhere near complete by 1922, of Soviet cinema with the Soviet state. The modes of writing found in these sections – veering from discussions of poems and music to film theory and analysis, history, biography, and political philosophy – may seem maddeningly heterogeneous. I can justify their diversity only by offering them as a way of being faithful to the wrenching confrontations of utopian possibility with violent closure, radical hope with radical fear, that characterized this historical juncture – a juncture crucial to what would happen during the rest of the 20th century, and not just in Russia.

Chuguev, Music and Interval

David Kaufman would become part of the “Soviet” dynamic only in the spring of 1918, when he was hired by Mikhail Kol’tsov to work on the Kino-Nedelia newsreels. Between 1916 and that crucial moment, much would happen in Kaufman’s life, though
most of those happenings remain obscure; again, informed conjecture is required to illuminate them.

Of David Kaufman’s time at the Chuguev Military School, there is, alas, little to say. We know that he began his studies there after being drafted sometime around September 1916, and had left for Moscow – his base city for the rest of his days⁹ - by no later than around November of 1917, although exactly when is unclear.¹⁰ The school,

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⁹ Dziga Vertov v vospominaniakh sovremennikov, 76. Even while working for the All-Ukraine Film and Photo Administration in Kiev from 1927-1931, Vertov and Svilova kept a room in the same communal apartment where he had settled with the Lembergs in 1917. Oddly, a transit visa for traveling through Belgium in July 1931 indicates that he was residing in “Khorkoff” [Kharkov] (RGALI f. 2091, op. 1, d. 412, l. 29), and perhaps for a time, he was.

¹⁰ See TsGIASpb f. 115, op. 2, d. 4048, ll. 14, 17-18; and the discussion of Vertov’s friendship with Aleksandr Lemberg, below. The head of the recruitment office in Bogorodsk (near Moscow) wrote to the director of the Psychoneurological Institute on 12 September 1916 that “David Abelevich Kaufman was fully able to serve” and would be sent into the army immediately; Vertov himself had requested copies of his documents from the Institute (on 26 August 1916), evidently in connection with the recruitment. Yet on 18 July 1917 – after the Tsar’s abdication, and a little over a month after then-War Minister Kerensky had ordered a massive Russian offensive against the Austro-Hungarians – a representative of the Student Commission of the Psychoneurological Institute wrote to the head of the Chuguev Military School asking that a document concerning David Abelevich Kaufman sent by the Institute be returned, in accord with some unknown agreement of 9 June 1917. I have been unable to sort out the full meaning of this correspondence, but it seems that perhaps some kind of amnesty had been granted to students at the Institute (and perhaps elsewhere as well), and that the request had possibly been prompted by David Kaufman’s intention to re-register (TsGIASpb, f. 115, op.2, d. 4048, ll. 8, 15, 18). On a form he filled out prior to being named an Honored Artist of the USSR by the Central Committee in June 1947, Vertov indicated that he had studied between 1916 and 1918 in the Physics and Mathematics Faculty of Petrograd University, but it seems as though these studies (of which I have found no other evidence) must have been very brief indeed, if they took place at all; perhaps Vertov in 1947 was loath to admit that he had studied in a well-known Tsarist military academy (RGASPI f. 17, op. 125, d. 499, l. 47). For his part, Boris Kaufman also indicated, in an interview with Simon Kagan in 1978, that Vertov was studying “somewhere in Ukraine” in and around 1917 (Boris Kaufman Archive, Beinecke Library, Yale University). Lev Roshal’ mentions Vertov attending the “military-musical school in Chuguev” as well, but implies that this recruitment and training preceded Vertov’s study in the
located not far from Kharkov – later capital (until 1935) of the Ukrainian SSR, which
Vertov would later visit on the agit-trains, and still later depict in a number of his films –
had existed since 1865, first as an infantry school for junkers (officers-in-training) and
later, after 1910, as a broadly based officer training institution. Entry into the school was
dependent upon either prior education in a gymnasium or passing an exam or audition,
and Kaufman evidently qualified on both counts.11

On the one hand, if the draft was unavoidable, one could have done worse than
study music at this fairly out-of-the-way (if quite prestigious) military institute. On the
other, of course, this was a time of war, and during the massive mobilization of July
1917, three months after the Provisional Government recommenced hostilities against
Germany, the school sent a contingent of 150 junkers to the front. I would surmise that
David Kaufman had already left Chuguev by this time, released by what seems to have
been an amnesty granted to university students in June 1917, although the evidence is
admittedly very vague on this point.12

At any rate, David’s experience in Chuguev would have been atypical, and not
only because of its brevity. For one thing, discipline at the school eroded rapidly after
February 1917, due to the increasing radicalization of trainees and even some of the
teaching staff, who were visited regularly and openly by representatives of the Kharkov

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11 Boris Syrtsov, “Chuguevskoe voennoe uchilishche, 1916-1917 gg.,” Voennaia Byl’ 90

12 See footnote 10, above.
Soviet of Soldier’s and Worker’s Deputies. It is more interesting, of course, to think about the kind of musical training Kaufman received there, although the frustrating dearth of documentary evidence condemns us largely to speculation. If the Chuguev School was not, from what I can tell, particularly well known among Russian military academies for its musical subdivision, the musical level achieved by those academies on the whole was very high, and we might expect that the Chuguev players strove to live up to those standards. Military orchestras in Moscow and St. Petersburg regularly performed elaborate arrangements of major works on the stages of both the Bolshoi and Mariinskii Theaters, often as benefits for war invalids; even in the provinces, various garrison orchestras would often unite to perform works by Wagner, Berlioz, Balakirev and Tchaikovsky (the 1812 Overture was, predictably, a favorite). Thus, we can assume that the Chuguev School’s music students, selected through audition and assembled from all over the Empire, must have received a rigorous training in their craft.

This musical thematic prompts me to insert a necessary parenthesis here about David Kaufman’s early relationship to sound, in part because his Chuguev experience figured in his intensive early concern with music in the years 1916 through early 1918. We have already referred to his studies at the Bialystok Musical School, and to the possible influence of Bücher’s Arbeit und Rhythmus. As we will see in future chapters, later critics and filmmaking colleagues would continually point to music as providing

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13 See Syrtsov, “Chuguevskoe voennoe uchilishche,” 37-38. After the staff and students of the Aleksandrovskii Military School had risen up against the Bolsheviks in November 1917, the Chuguev School’s director, General Ieremej Iakovlevich Vrasskii, called up a supporting brigade, but it was stopped in its tracks by the Kharkov Soviet, which soon afterwards took over the school itself with armed force.

perhaps the most fundamental model for Vertov’s non-narrative formal practice, and not without reason.\textsuperscript{15} Though inchoate, the fragmentary evidence we possess suggests that the years immediately preceding his entry into cinema may have been his most music-centered period, as manifest in two ways: his reflections, mainly in poetic form, on the work of Aleksandr Scriabin (1872-1915); and his experimentation with the transcription and montage of sound in what he called a “laboratory of hearing.”

In conversation with film scholar Vladimir Magidov in 1971, the pianist and journalist Olga Toom, Vertov’s first wife and (as we will see later) one of his colleagues on the agit-trains, offered an astonishing anecdote about Vertov’s intense love for and capacity to play Scriabin, his favorite composer. Apparently, Vertov asked Toom to show him how to play one of Scriabin’s fiendishly difficult etudes just by moving her fingers, without a piano. Toom obliged, Vertov observed her, and then (according to Toom) he proceeded to actually play the etude on a piano keyboard. Now, those of us who even feebly grasp the difficulty of Scriabin’s music – not to mention the difficulty of translating finger gesticulations into actual music – may well have (envious?) suspicions about this story’s veracity. Still, it no doubt affirms, from the standpoint of a professional pianist, Vertov’s real musical gifts, and the depth of his interest in and understanding of one of the most exploratory composers of his day.\textsuperscript{16}

This is not the place, of course, for an account of Scriabin’s innovations in harmony or his virtuoso expansions of the resources of the piano: his “mystic chord.”

\textsuperscript{15} For instance, Mikhail Kaufman (in DVVS, 71).

\textsuperscript{16} Magidov, Zrimaja Pamiat’ Istorii, 122-123.
tritonal textures, galactically swelling tremolos, and so on. More important for thinking about Vertov, I believe, is some reference to the kinds of critical and ideological discourse that grew up in early 20th century Russia around Scriabin’s harmonically unpredictable, emotionally hypercharged, bristlingly complex, formally unconventional compositions, the later works in particular. Russian music critics of the early twentieth century – who often punctuated their eulogies to the “genius” Scriabin with flashes of skepticism regarding his theories – offered numerous précis of Scriabin’s musical ideology, linking his thought to that of the German Romantics and of Nietzsche, Schopenhauer and Vladimir Solovyov, describing it as a kind of mystical monism directed toward a historical endpoint at which all difference would ultimately (and aesthetically) be subsumed in a cosmic “I”: at once the self’s unlimited expansion and its cancellation in Universal Consciousness.

Though much of Scriabin’s music-theoretical writing seems to tend toward a solipsistic position wherein “the world is the result of my activity, my creativity, and my desire” – prompting the Marxist Georgii Plekhanov, on meeting Scriabin in Geneva, to quip “so it’s to you, Aleksandr Nikolaevich, that we owe this fine weather!” – the fundamental movement of his thought, for the majority of critics, is toward constant self-transcendence, ultimately yielding a new collectivity:

The stream of consciousness is a series of creative breakthroughs; the movement from one to the next is rhythmic, and together they make up a rhythmical figure. The creator strives always excelsior, excelsior; each of his breakthroughs present a passionate straining toward the overcoming of obstacles . . . .

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17 For a musicological, historical and ideological account of Scriabin’s music, see Richard Taruskin, Defining Russia Musically (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 308-359.

transformation of consciousness, and with it the nature of all things, [amounts to] a mystic ekstasis, the flowing-together of all individual consciousnesses into a higher synthesis of Universal Consciousness.19

The practical upshot of this striving is a continual resistance to established form, decorum, and habit – although Scriabin did in fact write symphonies, mazurkas, sonatas and so on, however unusually shaped – and a concomitant shedding of the accretions of convention, local or ethnic identity, political interest, even of language itself.20

The famous musicologist Aleksandr Petrovich Koptiaev went so far as to assert of Scriabin’s work that, far from being “national,” it returns music to its “primordial essence,” to those Bacchic origins that lie beyond and beneath history.21 And indeed, I believe that on some level, such notions about Scriabin’s work (fortified with and complicated by inspiration offered by the poetry of the Futurists and (later) Constructivism) provided Vertov with many of his standards for what art should be, even when he denied that he was producing “art”: it should be complex, ecstatically emotional, sui generis, directed toward the Universal.22

19 Ibid., 17, 19; emphasis in the original.

20 A.P. Koptiaev (in his A.N. Skriabin (Moscow: I. Iurgenson, 1916), 38) discusses Scriabin’s intense antagonism toward the incorporation of verbal texts into his work – an antagonism largely shared, as we will see, by Vertov.

21 A. Koptiaev, Evterpe: Vtoroj sbornik muzykal’no kriticheskix statej (St. Petersburg: Glavnoe Upravlenie Udelov, 1908), 102. For related reflections, see also Evgenii Gunst, A.N. Skriabin i ego tvorchestvo (Moscow: Mys’, 1915), esp. 8-13.

22 Indeed, Scriabin’s influence is directly detectable in much early Soviet thinking about art, even in its most radical, past-denying varieties. An article by Iosif legis that surprisingly appeared in the pages of the Constructivist journal Spectacles (Zrelishcha) argued that Scriabin’s search for an identity underlying gestures, color and sound came from his interest in dreams, where such trans-sensory identities are supposedly experienced. The ultimate Scriabinian dream, according to legis, would amount to a
Paradoxically, however, Koptiaev also directly relates Scriabin’s Dionysian music to contemporary Russian social upheavals, which presumably also involve the dismantling of old traditions:

Scriabin's art began to form in the period [around 1905] when revolutionary storms thickened across Russia. Sheer will came to the forefront, for law was absent. Scriabin gathered that revolutionary lightning in his crosier, like a true Jupiter. If it matters not at all, in terms of the world's movement, whether Russia has a constitution or not, the author of the “divine poem” was nonetheless an indubitable and involuntary singer of the howling of sheer movement. Movement as such, movement no matter what – that was what satisfied his musical outlook. . . . Is it not truly Scriabin who is the liberator of our souls?\(^{23}\)

Two different conceptions of history overlap in Koptiaev's account of Scriabin's boundary-breaking music: on one side, history as a burden of tropes, values and restrictions – those “[traditions] of all the dead generations [weighing] like a nightmare on the brains of the living”\(^{24}\) – that must be shaken off; on the other, as the living, dynamic movement of a specific social totality now creating its own present and future. And it might be said that these “negative” and “positive” polarities shake hands in Scriabin’s famous synaesthetic project of linking colors to sounds, which would both unification (through the composer’s Mysterium) of all the senses of all people – dream as utopian future, in other words – even if this apocalyptic performance could happen only when “the waking world disappears . . . at the end of this world and the beginning of the new, when the world is converted into a divine dream” (“O ‘misterii’ Skriabina,” Zrelishcha 36 (1923): 5).

\(^{23}\) Koptiaev, \textit{Evterpe}, 108.

\(^{24}\) Marx, \textit{Eighteenth Brumaire}. 
undo the hardened opposition of aural and visual sensory modalities, and legislate a new set of correspondences.\textsuperscript{25}

To be sure, this syncretic aspect of the composer’s work would have met with disapproval from the fiercely purist Vertov of the early 20s, who protested

\dots against that mixing of the arts which many call synthesis. The mixture of bad colors, even those ideally selected from the spectrum, produces not white, but mud.

Synthesis should come at the summit of each art’s achievement and not before.\textsuperscript{26}

Vertov’s insistence on purity needs to be taken with a large grain of salt: certainly when measured against his own films, but also in light of Bruno Latour’s chastening reminder that “moderns” of all sorts programmatically purify in order then to (consciously or unconsciously) hybridize and mix.\textsuperscript{27} Indeed, in this respect, Scriabin’s key affinity with Vertov’s later work lies less in any attempts at cross-sensory or inter-art synthesis and more in the effort to divide up and recombine the phenomenal world in different ways,

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\item \textsuperscript{25} On Scriabin’s color-music projects, including his interest in constructing a one-octave color piano (a “tastiéra per luce”), see V.G. Karatygin, _Skriabin_ (Petrograd: N.I. Butkovskiaia, 1915), 65-66; and Konstantin Bal’mont, _Svetozyv v Prirode i Svetovaia Simfonia Skriabina_ (Moscow: Rossijskoe Muzykal’noe Izdatel’stvo, 1917). It seems that some of the “scientific” impulse behind the Russian interest in synesthesia came from psychologist Alfred Binet, whose 1892 work on “colored hearing” (“La problème de l’audition colorée,” _Revue des Deux Mondes_ 113 (October 1892): 586-614) was translated into Russian in 1894 (_Vopros o Tsvetnom Slukhe_, trans. D.N. Kushnerev, 1894). From the 1960s onward, Scriabin's experiments were carried on in Kazan' by the "Prometheus" group, under the leadership of Bulat Galeev.
\item \textsuperscript{26} “We: Variant of a Manifesto” [1922], in _Kino-Eye_, 7.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Bruno Latour, _We Have Never Been Modern_, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993). Insofar as purification impulses are the result of idealizations (of medium, of technology and so on), however, it might be thought that post-modernism sublates this tension into an idealization of “impurity” itself (reified as “hybridity”), thereby becoming not a post-modernism, but merely modernism’s own final impasse.
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and to startle the senses themselves out of their reified inertia. At the same time, as we know, Vertov’s later explorations of pure movement had norms and standards of their own, specifically provided by “the rhythm of machines, the delight of mechanical labor,” with which his films would bring people into “closer kinship.” In his early encounter with Scriabin, however, Vertov, then a poet and schooled musician rather than a filmmaker, seems to have been more struck by the composer’s relatively intuitive work upon the material of music – harmonies, scales, timbres – whose “primordial essence,” and contingent relation to conventional tonal meaning, Scriabin’s experiments helped to reveal.

Perhaps I can demonstrate this more easily through reference to a cluster of Vertov’s Futurist-styled poems, composed as early as 1917 and probably no later than 1920, which he dedicated to Scriabin. It seems that these poems were examples of what Vertov later called “etudes” to be apprehended by listeners “simultaneously as music and as poetry.” They appeared as part of a larger literary project that involved the composition of works that blurred the difference between prose and poetry as well:

[These etudes] represented transitional steps from a poetic composition to a prosaic one. It turned out that alongside prose and poetry exist a whole series of transitional, intervening forms of a specific type [and between which there’s no sense in setting boundaries]. . . . Several of the [poetic-musical] compositions, which seemed to me more or less accessible to a wide audience, I attempted to declaim aloud. I wrote the more complex things [veshchi], which required long

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28 To be sure, as Juliet Koss’s recent work on the Gesamtkunstwerk shows, the original Wagnerian notion of the “total work of art” cannot be reduced to a simple matter of “synthesis” either, inasmuch as the composer regarded such works as a space for the dialectical struggle of different arts for their own (ultimately limited) autonomy, almost a laboratory where the very boundaries between “media” might be investigated (Juliet Koss, Modernism after Wagner (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), xii, 16-19).

29 “We: Variant of a Manifesto,” in Kino-Eye, 9.
and attentive reading, on large yellow posters. I put up these announcements around the city, pasting them up myself [in both Moscow and the provinces].

The passage implies that for Vertov – reflecting here on his own youthful work almost 20 years later, after a whole series of historical “intervening forms” had been traversed - the literary (prosaic and poetic), musical, and visual (in the form of the posters) ways of working upon form and material were conceived early on not in terms of atomized “arts” to be unified (or re-unified) into a Gesamtkunstwerk, but rather as historically radically contingent in and of themselves. The task, therefore, is less synthesis of different artistic modalities than the dissolution of those modalities as such.

One of the poetic-musical etudes, dated 1917 in one manuscript, was elaborately illustrated by N. Smolianinov with a decadent-symbolist (rather than Futurist) picture of severed hands and death’s heads straining toward a huge, handsome visage emerging out of the sunrise:

Otrazhalsia v ozere?
Videl son li ia?
V ognetomimoe nebo li nemo lez?

Was he reflected in the lake?
Was I dreaming?
Did I climb silently toward the fire-parched sky?

Ruki slomennye
Tselymi grozd’iami
Plyli neumolimomu LITSU naper[er]ez.

Broken-off arms
In whole clusters swam
Heading off the implacable FACE.

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30 “Kak Rodilsia i Razvivalsia Kino-Glaz,” Stat’i i Vystupleniiia, 291-292, 562. The English phrases inserted here in square brackets were included by Vertov in earlier drafts of the essay, but not in the final one.
I zvuk ogromlennyi
Otrazhalsia gulami
Ukhodia bagrimomu nebu v grud’.

And a sound grown enormous
Was reflected in rumbles
Departing into the incarnadined sky, to its breast.

Obernulsia istomlennyj
Pokazalis’ grimami
Zaria i grozdi ruk i zhut’.

Exhausted, [I] turned around:
The dawn, the clusters of hands, the terror
Seemed like greasepaint.31

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31 RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 228, l. 4; the file contains several other poems dedicated to Scriabin, the latest dated February 1920 (ll. 4-7). The poem I have translated above is reproduced with Smolianinov’s “music of pigments” (and presumably his calligraphy as well) in Tsivian, ed., _Lines of Resistance_, 37. The picture is inscribed with the phrase “Dziga Vertov sings-recites,” and so it seems to be associated with a performance of the poem.
A symbolic landscape of sorts emerges out of these verses - an apocalyptic dream-tableau of fiery skies, thunder, and a kind of “cult of personality” *avant le mot* – which, on the level of content, has a certain overtonal relationship of mood to Scriabin's darker, more writhing works (think, for instance, of the Piano Sonata No. 9, op. 68). Indeed, Vertov hints that the poem was written for recitation to the accompaniment of a specific, unknown Scriabin work.32 Yet Yuri Tsivian is certainly right to describe the poem as

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32 In some 1929 notes, Vertov refers to his early work of “projecting musical fragments onto words” (“Vertov i kinoki,” *Stat’i i vystupleniiia*, 188); and “Was he reflected in the lake?” may well have been a musical ekphrasis of this sort. Another poem, dated 1920, is dedicated to Scriabin but subtitled “Prelude Op. 11” (RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 228, l. 7).
essentially untranslatable, not least because the complex play of aural and visual echoing draws more attention to itself than to any meanings the words might convey.

This suggests, paradoxically, that readers without Russian could still discern the poem’s corporeal textures, although the force of their prominence, of course, can only be adequately perceived in tension with the poem’s semantics. All the same, non-Russian speakers (keeping in mind analogous practices in Hopkins and Joyce) might be able to appreciate how inter-resonating clusters like “otrazhalsia v ozere,” “nebo li nemo,” “ognetomimoe. . . neumolimomu,” “ogromlennyi/Otrazhalsia gulami,” “bagrimomu. . . grimami,” and so on, pull the sonic and graphemic stuff of language, and thus the sense of poetry as a materially constructed thing, into view. Letters, phonemes and the work of combining them, like chordal combinations for Scriabin, thus drift away into (partial) autonomy from the logic that normally and “self-evidently” governs them.

It is not clear whether Scriabin’s recordings of his own music were among the works that Vertov subjected to recombination in his famous “laboratory of hearing,” probably established sometime between 1916 and 1918, and far more likely in either Moscow or Petrograd than in Chuguev. This “laboratory,” invariably referred to in short bios of the filmmaker, is arguably the most poorly understood aspect of his early career, not least because Vertov offers only the vaguest hints as to what his “laboratory” work

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33 Lines of Resistance, 36.

34 All extant recordings of Scriabin playing his own music derive from piano rolls; however, he apparently made several wax cylinder recordings, now lost, in or around 1913 (http://www.answers.com/topic/alexander-scriabin-the-composer-as-pianist).
consisted in.\textsuperscript{35} In the indispensable “How Kino-Eye Was Born and Developed” from 1935, he indicates that his work on the mnemonic montage of words – discussed in Chapter One – was succeeded by an interest in the “montage of stenographic recordings” and “experiments with gramophone recordings, where [he created] a new composition out of separate fragments [taken] from gramophone records.”\textsuperscript{36}

Whether the stenographic montages involved the juxtaposition of textual fragments written in some shorthand code or other is unknown, although the montage was certainly intended to be semantic as well as formal. It seems unlikely that these stenographic efforts were aural recordings, even if Vertov might have employed a Dictaphone (given that device’s relative availability in cities globally after around 1910) or blank Pathé phonograph cylinders for work on a different project, his long lost “remixes” from existing recordings. It is almost impossible to determine, in truth, which recording apparatus Vertov actually used; that he employed some sort of homemade device, built or jerry-rigged perhaps with the assistance of his technically adept brother Mikhail, is not out of the question.\textsuperscript{37}

\textsuperscript{35} He refers to the “laboratory of hearing” in the 1929 notes cited above – a draft autobiography of sorts – under the heading “rhythmic montage of verbal and sound material,” as the fourth and final entry preceded by “montage of words” [‘Cities of Asia’], “montage of noises” [‘sawmill’] and the “projection” of words onto music mentioned above (“Vertov i Kinoki,” Stat’i i Vystupleniiia, 188).

\textsuperscript{36} “Kak Rodilsia i Razvivalsia Kino-Glaz,” Stat’i i Vystupleniiia, 289.

\textsuperscript{37} Gramophones, Zonophones, Lyrophones and many other record-playing devices were readily available in urban centers in Russia during these years; less has been written about home recording devices. For early recording, see P.H. Griunberg, Istoriiia Nachala Gramzapisi v Rossii [in one volume with V.L. Ianin, Katalog Vokal’nykh Zapisej Rossijskogo Otdeleniiia Kompanii “Grammofon”] (Moscow: Iazyki Slavianskoj Kul’tury, 2002); and Anita Pesce, La Sirena nel solco: Origini della riproduzione sonora (Naples: Guida, 2005).
In any event, Vertov’s laboratory – which consisted of nothing more than “his work and the room in which he worked” –38 was not a recording studio but rather a space for non-mechanical, manual inscription and transcription of various kinds, whether the medium be notes, words, or some other nomenclature.39 Again, his experiments, which led him directly to an encounter with the problems of documenting “raw” reality, were provoked by a sense of the inadequacy of existing representational vocabularies to the complexities of experience.

... I wasn’t satisfied by experiments with already recorded sounds. Within the natural world, I heard a significantly greater quantity of varied sounds, [beyond] singing or violin playing as heard in the repertoire of conventional gramophone records.

I hit upon the idea that it was necessary to expand our capacities to hear in an organized way. Not to limit those capacities within the bounds of ordinary music. Within the concept “I hear,” I included the entire audible world. To this period belongs my experiment in recording the sounds of a sawmill.

It happened while I still going to school,40 during the holidays, not far from Lake Il’men’. There was a sawmill in the area that belonged to a wealthy landowner named Slavianinov.41 I had arranged with a girl I knew to meet at the sawmill. She was hard pressed to get there on time – she had to run out of the house without being noticed – and I ended up having to wait there for hours. I dedicated those hours to listening to the mill. I tried to describe this audible mill the way that a blind person might. At the beginning I jotted down words, and then made an attempt to record all the sounds with letters.

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38 “Kak Rodilsia i Razvivalsia Kino-Glaz,” 292.

39 In other words, when Vertov writes of his “experiment in the recording of the sounds of the sawmill” [moj opyt po zapisi zvukov lesopil’nogo zavoda], it seems, judging from his text, that he has in mind written transcription rather than mechanical sound recording (“Kak Rodilsia i Razvivalsia Kino-Glaz,” 291); see below.

40 Vertov’s diction here suggests that he might have still been at the Bialystok Modern School at this time.

41 Lake Il’men’ is in the western part of the present-day Novgorod region, part of the basin of the Baltic Sea. A somewhat obscurely phrased Wikipedia entry indicates that a landowner named Slavianinov held land in this area, with mills and small factories built upon it [http://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Устъ-Волма].
This system had the disadvantage, first, that the existing alphabet is inadequate for recording the sounds heard at a sawmill. Secondly, besides vowels and consonants, one heard various melodies and motifs. They also needed to be recorded with some kind of notational sign. But notes appropriate to the recording of natural sounds did not exist. I became convinced that, with the means I had at my disposal, I could achieve only the imitations of sounds, but could not analyze an audible mill or waterfall in the way that was necessary.

With my ear I distinguished not noises, as it’s conventional to call natural sounds, but a whole series of highly complex combinations of specific sounds, sound that often mutually destroyed or interfered with one another. The situation was difficult because there was no instrument I could use to record and analyze these sounds. So I gave up my attempts temporarily, and returned to working on the organization of words.42

As we will see much later on, this passage develops notions that, within Vertov’s textual corpus, are first clearly enunciated during his defenses of one of his most formally radical films, Enthusiasm: Symphony of the Donbass (1930), with its clamorous industrial soundtrack: the idea, specifically, that there is no such thing as noise, but only sounds (or other sense-data) that are either ignored or imperfectly comprehended. Yet as readers will have noted, the passage also continues the narrative (“How Kino-Eye was Born and Developed”) that began with the account of the memorization strategies he used to gain conscious control over material assigned in school (“Miletus, Phocaea,” etc.); and it is crucial that we see how Vertov, telling the story of his creative evolution, here drastically alters the meaning of those strategies.

For what originally seemed to be the imposition of an easy-to-remember rhythmical order upon a set of names (“a rhythmical series that could be memorized immediately”)43 now appears as the discovery “within the natural world” of infinite meaning, and the concomitant discovery of consciousness’s capacity for discovery: as if

42 Stat’i i Vystupleniia, 291.
43 See discussion at the end of Chapter One.
(although Vertov doesn’t say this) whatever “rhythmical series” David Kaufman had used to recall the names of Greek islands and cities had somehow inhered in the names themselves. An *ad hoc* mnemonic technique opens a passage toward an infinity of orders, all of them conceptual on some level (“not noises . . . but . . . highly complex combinations”), but in excess of any notational logic.

To be sure, we need to keep in mind Vertov’s less visible motives for telling this story in the mid-1930s. Obviously (as the further unfolding of “How Kino-Eye was born and developed” makes clear), he is preparing a space for the heroic intervention of mechanical recording equipment, whether aural or optical, and therefore for his own vocation as experimental non-fiction filmmaker. The camera, for Vertov, will be the device that enables both capture and analysis: it grasps everything in the visible world – more, indeed, than the human eye does – but also produces records that can be enlarged, stopped, slowed down and otherwise subjected to close scrutiny. The refusal to reduce and the need for order and understanding, impulses starkly opposed to one another, are reconciled in a cinematic technology appropriate both to the visible world’s complexity and to a conscious articulation of that complexity. Vertov’s early-1920s theory of the cinematic “interval” – which attempted to overcome what might be called the “Bergsonian” problem of the punctual, limited character of cinematic registrations (whether shots or film frames) by conceptualizing film’s basic unit as a fluid *differential* between shots or frames, rather than shots or frames as such – is critical here as well, and
we will bring that theory to bear upon Vertov’s specifically filmic documentary practice in later chapters.\textsuperscript{44}

It is more difficult but equally important to see how Vertov’s 1935 tale links his apparently fanatically “formalist” concern with pattern and infinitesimal levels of detail to a utilitarian and even pedagogical impulse: the desire, that is, to liberate perception, or rather (to borrow from the rhetoric of the First Five-Year Plan) to push it to continual fulfillment and over-fulfillment of its own promise. Thus a suspect formalism, much noted and denounced by Vertov’s opponents, especially in the late 1920s-early 1930s, tries to clear its name by recalling its own origins as an eccentric form of sensory tutelage – thereby demonstrating its usefulness, presumably, in the modernizing Soviet Union of the 1930s.

I have again speculated on Vertov’s formative period anachronistically, through the prism of his later career, and not for the last time. Certainly, and despite the probable impact of his poetic and musical interests, Vertov’s later conception of cinema’s unique perceptual vocation borrowed at least indirectly from contemporary pre-Revolutionary defenses of non-fiction and (as we have seen) scientific cinema as well. Some of those defenses, indeed, presage Vertov’s shrillest formulations. “No one [sic] but the cinema” asserted critic S. Novodumskii in 1913,

\[\text{is able . . . to hurl harsh truth directly in the face – the unadorned truth, gray and monotone. The eye of cinema, if only freed from being led by the mendacious}\]

\textsuperscript{44} The privileged place occupied by sound in Vertov’s theories may have something to do with this problematic as well, insofar as sound recording might be said to have a relatively “continuous” character, as compared with the discrete units that comprise visual-cinematic “phenomena.” See the discussion of \textit{Enthusiasm} in Chapter Six, below.
hand of the human being, bears the mystery of total impartiality and the possession of objective, unassailable truth.\footnote{45 Vestnik Kinematografii 1913 (13): 14; cited in Roshal’, Nachalo vsekh nachal, 60. The Vestnik Kinematografii piece is a summary of an article by Novodumskii (“Vystavka uzhasa”) that originally appeared in the journal Den’.

Yet that peculiar amalgam of science, music, poetry and propaganda that is Vertovian “non-acted” cinema could only emerge in the post-Revolutionary world. That world would soon surround Vertov and his peers with sights and sounds different from anything they had previously encountered; as it turned out, it would also give Vertov the chance to capture and even “organize” those sights and sounds, on film.

\textit{After the Revolution: Futurism Early and Late}

In Moscow along with his family sometime after the Tsar’s abdication in February 1917, David Kaufman seems to have largely ceased his studies and begun attending poetry readings and cafés frequented by the artistic \textit{bohème}.\footnote{46 According to Boris Kaufman, the family was reunited in Moscow, after Vertov had returned there from Ukraine and Mikhail had finished his studies in the gymnasium (Boris Kaufman Archive, Beinecke Library, Gen MSS 562/16/335). Mikhail completed those studies in Mogilev (now in Belarus), the site of the headquarters of the Russian Imperial Army during World War I (RGALI f. 2986, op.1, d. 112), apparently between 1915 and the middle of 1917. It has been asserted that Vertov attended university, perhaps law school, in Moscow at some point between 1914 and 1918 (e.g., Abramov, \textit{Dziga Vertov}, 8; Tsivian, ed., \textit{Lines of Resistance}, 23); and in his “personal file” from 1947, Vertov indicates that he studied in the Physics and Mathematics Department at “Leningrad University” [sic] between 1916 and 1918 (RGASPI f. 17, op. 125, d. 499, l. 47). However, I have found no independent confirming evidence of study in either of these institutions. They took place, if at all, only between the very end of 1916/beginning of 1917 and May 1918.}

Mikhail Kaufman describes this as a period of hardship for his older brother, which implies, I
think, that David was neither working nor studying at the time, and probably not living with his parents.47 It was late in 1917 that David, already using “Dziga Vertov” as a pseudonym, apparently made his first major acquaintance with someone from the world of cinema, a man who was to work with him on a number of films, including some of the Kino-Nedelias and One Sixth of the World, the then-19-year-old professional movie cameraman Aleksandr Lemberg (1898-1976). Lemberg, whose father Grigorii was also an important cameraman and (later) sometime newsreel director, had actually shot his first two fiction films at the end of 1915 – “King with a Crown” and “Chess Game of Love,” both directed by M. Bonch-Tomashevskii and both starring the young Aleksandr Vertinski – for the Persky-Kogan firm.48

When Lemberg was drafted at the beginning of 1917, producer Robert Persky paid him the then huge sum of 1000 rubles a month to film the responses on the front to the February Revolution. After permission was received from the military authorities – the state monopoly on production of military newsreel had just been abolished49 -- Lemberg was stationed at the High Command of the Army in Mogilev (now in Belarus), from whence he filmed action on the front. When he met Kaufman/Vertov, evidently sometime late in the fall of 1917, he was an artillery reservist in Moscow, waiting to be called up.50

47 Dziga Vertov v vospominaniakh sovremennikov, 76.


49 See discussion of the Skobelev Committee, below.

50 A.G. Lemberg, “Iz Vospominanii Starogo Operatora,” 120. Lemberg is also famous for having filmed Lenin on 1 May 1917 in Petrograd. Interestingly, Mikhail Kaufman was
Our family lived in the same place I now live, in Kozitskii Lane.\textsuperscript{51} I occasionally went to the “Poets’ Café,” located across from the Central Telegraph building, and there listened to poems and arguments about war, revolution, and art.

Once sitting next to me at the table was a young man who, as became clear during our conversation, was excited about the poetry of [Vladimir] Mayakovsky, which drew us together immediately. My new acquaintance became much interested when I he found out that I was a cameraman. He asked me about the laws of cinematography, about the capacities of the newsreel camera, and finally about my most recent filming at the front.\textsuperscript{52}

After that, we occasionally met at the “Poets’ Café.” I found out that my interlocutor was named Dziga Vertov, that he’d graduated from a music school, and afterwards studied at the Psychoneurological Institute in Petersburg. Arriving in Moscow, Vertov didn’t have a permanent address, and was moving from one apartment to another. After we grew close and became friends, he began living with our family for a good long while.\textsuperscript{53}

The “Poet’s Café” was established by the Cubo-Futurist poets Mayakovskiy, Vasilii Kamenskii and David Burliuk in a former laundry on the corner of Tverskaia Street still attending school in Mogilev when Lemberg was stationed there, though they surely never met during that time.

\textsuperscript{51} This street is located near the center of Moscow, not far from Pushkin Square, and is where Vertov and Svilova also resided for many years (until December 1937: see RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 254, ll. 78-78ob, and Chapter Eight, below), in the same communal apartment where Lemberg lived.

\textsuperscript{52} Lemberg was filming non-fiction/newsreel on the front for the Kogan-Persky firm.

\textsuperscript{53} DVVS, 79. In another memoir, Lemberg claimed that Vertov actually worked as his camera assistant just before the October events - which they could not capture, not having their own camera or film - soon after which Lemberg was drafted by the Bolsheviks to serve as a watchman. Upon returning home, wrote Lemberg, he found that Vertov had drafted on paper a series of montage-like fragments, non-narrative but "very vivid," about the Revolution. I am a bit dubious of these claims, having not found independent confirmation of them elsewhere (including in Lemberg’s other writings), but perhaps they should be believed (A. Lemberg, "Dziga Vertov prikhodit v kino," Iz Istorii Kino 7 (1968): 39-50; here 41).
(Moscow’s main central thoroughfare) and Nastas’inskii Lane in late November 1917, shortly after the Bolshevik takeover on 25 October (7 November NS). \(^{54}\) There they recommenced the Moscow readings that had been so popular in the pre-war years. According to Lev Grinkrug, Mayakovsky’s close friend and a frequent patron of the café, the most varied sort of public assembled [there] every day. Here were Red Army soldiers, sailors, and just plain philistines. Anarchists often came by, who at this time occupied the building next door. . . from time to time they created a scandal by firing shots, until they were liquidated entirely. The Futurists presented poems, agitational speeches, and attacked the philistines who, evidently, took great pleasure in this, for the public poured into the place in huge numbers. \(^{55}\)

After the October Revolution, both poets and public lost interest in the café, as issues of politics and day-to-day survival began to take center stage, and it was closed on 14 April 1918. \(^{56}\)

Prior to the closure, however, David Kaufman was a regular, and perhaps even read some of his own poems there. (Lemberg reported that David arrived at their apartment in Kozitskij Lane with nothing but "a rucksack half full of books."). \(^{57}\)

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\(^{55}\) Quoted in Jangfeldt, ibid.

\(^{56}\) Ibid., 17; and Krusanov, Russkii Avangard, vol. 2, book 1 (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2003), 321. There were other poetry cafés in Moscow as well, but judging from Krusanov’s account (312-334), they had mostly ceased operation by the beginning of summer 1918, coinciding with the rapid sharpening of hostilities in the Civil War at the end of May.

\(^{57}\) DVVS, 79.
Kaufman, then also in Moscow with his refugee parents, later spoke to Simon Kagan about the city’s dynamic poetic culture:

Intellectual life in Moscow was very intense. It was truly the intellectual center of Russia, [and] poets were the most popular people of the time. Mayakovsky, Anna Akhmatova, [Igor] Severianin . . . Poets read their own poems and the audience really participated in the reading. It was very intense. . . My brother Dziga, as you know, was a poet himself, and had a good relationship with the other poets.58

Boris, only 14 or so at the time, might have exaggerated his oldest brother’s closeness to those phenomenally popular “other poets”; but it was surely in Moscow in 1917-18 that David Kaufman drifted into the Futurist milieu, as an enthusiast of new poetry above all.59

We do not know when Kaufman first encountered the work of the Futurists, though it is not impossible that some of their writing might have trickled into his father’s bookstore, starting in 1913. Mayakovsky, David Burliuk and Vasilii Kamenskii may have made appearances in Bialystok and Grodno in March 1914, and it would have been possible for David Kaufman to have attended famous exhibits of experimental art like “Streetcar V” and “0.10” (in which Vladimir Tatlin and Kazimir Malevich both presented important work) in Petrograd during his years at the Psychoneurological Institute.60 It seems, however, that Kaufman first saw Mayakovsky in the flesh only in 1917-1918 in

58 “Entrevue avec Boris Kaufman,” Beinecke Library, Yale University, GEN MSS 562, box 16, folder 336, p. 3.

59 On the popularity that Futurism enjoyed in Moscow, see Krusanov, Russkii Avangard, vol. 2, book 1 (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2003), 324-325. For an excellent account of Vertov’s creative relationship to Futurism and Mayakovsky, see Petric, Constructivism in Film, 25-44.

60 Krusanov, Russkii Avangard, vol. 1, 252-272.
Moscow, in the auditorium of that city’s Polytechnical Museum.\textsuperscript{61} Judging from his own article drafts and diary reminiscences, all of which date from the 1930s, Vertov was a lifelong Mayakovsky fan:

\begin{quote}
[After the reading at the Polytechnical Museum] Mayakovsky noticed me in a group of excited young men. Evidently I was looking at him with enamored eyes. He came up to us. “We’re looking forward to your next book,” I said. “Get your friends together,” Mayakovsky answered, “and demand that they publish it soon.”

My meetings with Mayakovsky were always brief. In the street, at a club, at a train station, a movie theater. He called me not Vertov, but Dziga. I liked that. “Well, Dziga, how’s kino-eye doing?” he once asked me. That was in passing, at a train station somewhere. Our trains met. “Kino-eye is learning,” I answered. I thought a moment and said it differently: “Kino-eye is a beacon \textit{[mayak]} against the background of international film production’s clichés.” And where Mayakovsky shook my hand in parting (our trains were going in different directions), I added, stammering: “Not a beacon, but a Mayakovsky. Kino-eye is a Mayakovsky against the background of international film production’s clichés.” “A Mayakovsky?” The poet looked inquiringly at me. In answer I recited:

\begin{quote}
Where the people’s dock-tailed eye stops short,
at the head of hungry horders,
wearing the crown of thorns of revolution
1916 approaches.\textsuperscript{62}
\end{quote}

“You saw what the ordinary eye did not see. You saw how ‘from the West red snow is falling in the juicy flakes of human flesh.’ And the sad eyes of horses. And a mama, ‘white, white as the brocade on a coffin.’ And a violin that ‘wore itself to pieces, entreating, and suddenly began howling like a child.’ You are a

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{61} The Bialystok and Grodno readings were evidently planned, but it is not clear that they took place; see A.V. Krusanov, \textit{Russkii Avangard: 1907-1932}, vol. 1 (St. Petersburg: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 1996), 220. Vertov mentioned in a 1935 talk he gave at a Mayakovsky memorial lecture that he first saw the poet at the Polytechnical Museum (\textit{Stat’i i vystupleniia}, 296); the period in question was surely fall 1917 through spring 1918, when Mayakovsky made five appearances at the Museum (7 October 1917, 12 and 27 February, 16 March, and 23 May 1918 [all NS]) (V. Katanian, \textit{Maiakovskii: Literaturnaia khronika}, 3\textsuperscript{rd} ed. (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia Literatura, 1956), 95, 100-105). Interestingly, this was also the period of Mayakovsky’s initial major involvement with cinema, as actor and screenwriter.

\textsuperscript{62} Quotation from \textit{A Cloud in Trousers}.
\end{footnotesize}
kino-eye. You’ve seen ‘that which travels across mountains of time, which no one sees.’ And right now you’re

. . . . in the new,
future way of life,
multiplied
by electricity
and communism."63

Certainly, Vertov’s admiration for advanced work in poetry and visual art, and for that of the (also) politically radical Mayakovsky in particular, was intense, permanent, and often at odds with the values of his contemporaries. Cameraman Aleksandr Levitskii recalled the arguments he had with Vertov when they were working together on the agitational train October Revolution in 1920:

Dziga Vertov headed up film exhibition on the train. . . at the time [he] was still a young man about 22 years old, and was interested in left and ultra-left [i.e., avant-garde] tendencies in art. And it was precisely because of our conflicting views on art that we became friends.

I was and always remained a supporter of the realist tendency, and never recognized ultra-left directions in either painting or literature. Vertov, meanwhile, rejected the entire heritage of the art of the past, recited the poems of the Imaginists, and (in painting) reveled in Cubism. Because of these differences we had frequent [verbal] battles that, in truth, were completely pointless for both of us.64

63 Kino-Eye, 180-181; translation slightly modified. The provenance of this text, a translation from the 1966 Soviet edition of Vertov’s writings, is somewhat obscure (and in some cases converts statements about Mayakovsky into bits of dialogue with Mayakovsky), but it seems to be a reworking of drafts of a talk Vertov gave at a memorial for the poet on 24 April 1935 at the House of the Press, as well as some other, later notes (Stat’i i vystupleniia, 296-297, 433-437, 562-3, 590-591; RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 253, ll. 14-16ob, 55ob-57).

64 A. Levitskii, Rasskazy o kinematografie (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1964), 204). The Imaginists were a group of poets – primarily Anatolii Mariengof, Sergei Esenin, and the former Futurist Vadim Shershenevich – who placed emphasis on the creation of verbal “image”; the group was in existence from 1918-1925.
At some point during these years, according to a well-known story told by Aleksandr Lemberg, Vertov attempted to act upon his Futurist enthusiasm for idiosyncratic mingling of the poetic and the visual, using the Lemberg family’s apartment as his canvas.

Lemberg returned home on one occasion to find that

Vertov had covered the apartment – the walls and the ceiling – with a thick layer of soot. Imagine the parquet floor, and pitch-black darkness above it. The black walls were all covered with clocks painted in chalk, with their hands all showing different times. Each clock had a pendulum painted under its face, and these pendulums, too, were arrested in different positions, as if captured in swing. I did not like this at all. Vertov took pains to convince me that I just was not getting it, the room was his masterpiece. Can’t you see how the black paint creates the effect of infinite space stretching in all four directions? he asked. And the clock faces are a poem! Poem, I asked? Recite it. All right, listen: tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock. . . .

As Yuri Tsivian has suggested, “tick-tock” may well refer to a Vertov poem of that title— incomprehensible to everyone but Vertov himself, according to Lemberg - that dissolves the items in a room (table, chairs, lamp) in a swirl of figuration that links them to dogs, Zeppelins and pool cues.66 Lemberg later had the room repainted, to his family’s probable relief and Vertov’s temporary chagrin; and though Vertov’s experiment had clearly perplexed him, Lemberg in old age paid homage to his friend’s capacity “to feel the poetry both in the simple ‘tick-tock’ of a clock mechanism and in a complex sensation of limitless space.”67

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66 Lines of Resistance, 4, 34.

67 Dziga Vertov v vospominaniakh sovremennikov, 86.
Vertov’s ties to Futurism and its main representatives were at once poetic, ideological-theoretical, and institutional, bound up with his identity even on the level of name: “Vertov,” after all, is a Futurist neologism. Much of the poetry he wrote from around 1916 to 1920 is plainly indebted to the work produced by Mayakovsky during the same years, and particularly to the collection Simple as Mooing (1918), and the great long poem A Cloud in Trousers (1915; uncensored version published in early 1918), which Vertov claimed to have nearly committed to memory after a third reading. It is almost impossible to convey a clear sense of this Futurist mode of poetic writing in translation, given the Futurists’ programmatic emphasis upon the sonic and graphic materiality of verse, not to mention the sheer difficulty of their work. However, transcription and sensitive reworking can, with luck, give some impression of those features of Mayakovsky’s verse that seized Vertov’s imagination: thick internal rhyming that seems to loop every phoneme into every other phoneme; uninhibited play with roots and false cognates; high tension between the flow of syntactic periods and abrupt end-stops that splinter even single words into fragments, as here in the first lines of “From Street to Street” (1916):

U-litsa.
Litsa
U
dogov
godov
rez-
che.
Che-

68 Prostoe kak mychanie (Petrograd: Parus, 1916); Kino-Eye, 180; Stat’i i vystupleniia, 296; Literaturnaia zhizn’ Rossii 1920-kh godov, vol. 1, 110-111.
rez
zheleznykh konej
s okon begushchikh domov
prygnuli pervye kuby.69

The boulevard.
Bull-dogs
of years
your faces
grow steely.
Steel horses
steal the first cubes
jumping from the windows
of fleeting houses.70

The poem develops a remarkable internal graphic mirroring effect (“U / -litsa. / Litsa / U”; “rez- / che. / Che- / Rez”) alongside the more familiar rhyming entanglements ("dogov," “godov,” “domov”; “rez,” “zheleznykh”; “konej,” “okon”) that the translation cited here makes an honest attempt to suggest (“boule-,” “Bull-”; “steely,” “Steel,” “steal”). Most importantly, by breaking up what would seem to be discrete units (“U-litsa”/“boule-vard”), and then integrating these word fragments into lines unpredictably bound together both phonetically and graphically, Mayakovsky at once abandons traditional prosodic syntagms (whether line- or stanza-length) and opens up his “material” to minutely conceived and novel sequencing. As we will see as early as the Kino-Pravdas (in Chapter Five), Vertov-the-filmmaker takes up this problematic of radical sequencing as his own, making it central to his pursuit of a cinema that resists the lure of narrative-fictional tropes.

69 “Iz ulitsy v ulitsu,” Prostoe kak mychanie, 32.

70 http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/from-street-to-street/
Some of Vertov’s Futurist efforts in poetry mimic both these crabbed, specular phonetic textures and perhaps even the famous Mayakovskian “egoism,” as here in a poem entitled (what else?) “Dziga Vertov”:

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Zdes' ni zgi
Ver'te
Veki iga i
Grobov verigi
Prosto vetrov
Gibel'
Veki na vertep
No - dzin'! - vertet'
Diski
Gong v dver' aort
I – ð go gò! Avtovizgi,
Vertep rtov
Dziga Vertov.71
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Pitch dark here
Believe
Centuries of the yoke and
Fetters on coffins
Simply the death
Of winds
But - dzin'! - to spin
Disks
A gong at the door of aortas
And – oh ho ho! Yelps of cars,
A den of mouths
Dziga Vertov.
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Vertov’s poem, more than Mayakovsky’s, seems almost like an extended anagram woven out of a delimited set of sounds (“ve,” “ov,” “rt/tr” and “zd/dz/zg” are especially prominent) that yields a cascade of inter-resonating clusters: “ver,” “vek,” “vet”; “zgi,”

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71 RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 228, l. 20; the poem is dated September 1920. A different transcription of the same poem, along with a less literal, more “Futurist” translation by “T.S. Naivist” [Yuri Tsivian], appears in Lines of Resistance, 33.
“verigi,” “diski,” “avtovizgi,” “Dziga”; “grobov,” “vetrov,” “rtov,” “Vertov”; and so on.

(Indeed, the final appearance of “Dziga Vertov” might be thought of as a kind of revelation of the poem’s paradigm or underlying phonetic scale, rather than an authorial “name” of any kind.) On the level of sense, what would become a classic Vertovian formal trope makes an early appearance here at the poem’s exact midpoint (“But – dzin’!”), when the figuration suddenly shifts from bleak and mournful (“pitch dark,” “centuries of the yoke,” “death of winds”) to rowdy and clamorous (“dzin’!”, “spin/Disks,” “yelps of cars”). This kind of passage from stasis, silence, darkness and the Old to movement, sound, light and the New will be repeated over and over in Vertov’s films, at least from Kino-Eye onwards; and this poem, dated 1920, suggests that Vertov was concerned to convey the feel of radical transition even before his significant work in film began.

The debt of Vertov’s 1920s writing on film to Futurist theories and proclamations is plain. We will hold our detailed treatment of Vertov’s writing in reserve until Chapters Five and Six, but can note immediately how the imagery of his early manifestos – celebrating “the hurricanes of movement . . . the race of points, lines, planes, volumes . . . the poetry of machines . . . the blinding grimaces of red-hot streams,” and so on72 – derive to no small degree from Futurist rhetoric such as we find it in this 1914 lecture by Mayakovsky (as paraphrased by a journalist in attendance):

The poetry of futurism is the poetry of the city, of the contemporary city. The city replaces nature and the elements. The city itself is becoming nature, in whose bowels the new urban person is being born. Telephones, airplanes, express trains, elevators, rotating machines . . . factory chimneys . . . these are the elements of beauty in the new, urban nature. We see the electric lamp more often than the old romantic moon. We city-dwellers do not know forests, fields, and flowers. We

72 All from “We: Variant of a Manifesto” (1922), Kino-Eye, 9.
know the tunnels of streets with their movement, noise, banging, flashing, eternal rotation. Most importantly, the rhythm of life is changing. All has become lightning fast, fast flowing, like on a filmstrip. Even the peaceful, unhurried rhythms of the old poetry are not in accord with the psyche of the contemporary city-dweller. Feverishness – that’s what symbolizes the speed of contemporary life. In the city there are no even, measured, rounded lines; angles, sharp bends, zigzags – that’s what characterizes the image of the city. Poetry, according to the Futurists, must answer to the new elements of the psyche of the contemporary city.73

To be sure, even Vertov’s very earliest manifestos (from 1922-23) not only move to replace the urban imagery of classical Futurism (“telephones . . . elevators . . . the tunnels of streets”) with more strictly industrial topoi (“the delight of mechanical labor, the perception of the beauty of chemical processes . . . film epics of electric power plants and flame”),74 but also shy away from justifying “Kino-Eye” practice in terms of any modernized “psyche” already typical of contemporary life, instead giving primacy to technology as such – “electricity’s unerring ways . . . the light, precise movements of machines”75 – and its presumed capacity to generate entirely new, hitherto unknown modes of subjectivity in the future.76 Indeed, it may be that the effect of classic pre-

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74 “We: Variant of a Manifesto” (1922), Kino-Eye, 8.

75 Ibid., 7-8.

76 A full development of this notion would take up a good deal of space, and have to take account of countervailing assertions from within the Futurist camp. Viktor Shklovskii’s 1919 attack in Art of the Commune on the Proletkult notion of the need for a new art to correspond to the new proletarian society and consciousness – when Futurism, insisted Shklovskii, had by contrast always proposed that “new forms [of art] would create new content [in art and life]” – would be one important counterexample (“Ob iskusstve i
revolutionary Futurism is perceptible above all not in Vertov’s articles but in the
iconography of his films – the “evening full of contrasts” sequence in Stride, Soviet, for
instance (to be discussed in Chapter Four), and of course the whole of Man with a Movie
Camera – even if the early manifestos, rather than his poems, ultimately constitute
Vertov’s main contribution to the literature of late Futurism.77

In regard to questions of form and medium, the Futurist insistence on the
“autonomy of the word” obviously had a decisive if complex impact on Vertov’s thinking
about art in general. Mayakovsky again, from the same 1914 lecture:

   The word must not describe, but express in and of itself. The word has its smell,
color, spirit; the word is a living organism, and not only a badge for the
determination of some meaning or other. The word is capable of endless
cadences, like a musical scale.78

To be sure, this position helped to justify a project of radical experimentation that
effectively bracketed the problem of communicable meaning, removing conventional
“sense” as a regulative principle for the construction of verse, while still reserving a
necessary (if deferred) role for autonomous linguistic “expression.” As we will see in
later chapters, this attitude seems to have conditioned Vertov’s artistic ideology on a

77 I would add here that Vertov’s Futurist influences would appear to be exclusively
Russian: there is effectively no good evidence that he was directly acquainted with the
earlier Italian variant, and any influence was thoroughly mediated by Russian sources. On
the influence of Italian Futurism upon the Russians, see Anna Lawton, “Russian and
Italian Futurist Manifestoes,” Slavic and East European Journal 20:4 (Winter 1976): 405-
420.

78 Krusanov, Russkii Avangard: 1907-1932, vol. 1, 214. See also the classic manifestos in
Lawton and Eagle, eds., Words in Revolution, 55-81.
number of levels and throughout his career: from his ambiguously purist insistence on
separating artistic media to allow for their autonomous development; through his
antagonism toward freighting images with the tropes of fiction, explanatory intertitles or
(later) voiceover; and on to his doctrine, perhaps best realized (as suggested earlier) in
Enthusiasm, that what was usually deemed mere sonic and visual raw material, or noise,
in fact bore within itself expressive meaning whose actualization was cinema’s true task.
It might be thought that the Futurists operated with a far more counterintuitive set of
presuppositions, insofar as their raw material, language itself, seems fatally petrified
within well-nigh geological layers of sense that could hardly be chipped away by formal
experiment. Vertov, as we have already suggested and will see again, would have the
apparent advantage of working with less semantically burdened material –
indexical/iconic image and sound – that could be reconfigured into “endless cadences”
without ever losing its power immediately to refer.

Despite the frequent reliance of their poetry upon dense internal rhyming, the
Futurists seem not to have consistently related this practice to any mnemonic function of
the type that evidently interested Vertov from an early age. To be sure, they did
acknowledge the formal affinities between their poetry and older, anonymous chants and
incantations, and theorist Boris Arvatov in 1923 noted that the Futurist “coupling of
words acquires an aural and a psychoassociative expressiveness” which is “easily
memorized” after the fashion of “orally transmitted proverbs.”79 That Vertov’s concern
with mnemonic “formal binding” drew him toward this aspect of Futurist poetics seems

79 B. Arvatov, “Language Creation (On ‘Transrational’ Poetry),” in Anna Lawton and
Herbert Eagle, trans. and ed., Words in Revolution: Russian Futurist Manifestoes 1912-
was first published as “Rechetvorchestvo,” Lef 2 (1923): 79-91.
plausible; we might wonder, too, whether he might also have accepted the paradoxical pressure that this binding could place upon conventional linguistic meaning and comprehensibility. After all, the more the material (phonetic, graphic) weight of words in combination is stressed in order to make them memorable, the more likely it is that those words might stray from “normal” significations.

Indeed, it is worth noting parenthetically that some traditional mnemonic practices involved the creation of extravagant, near-nonsense kinds of sentences as a consequence of the imposition of memorable patterns or even full-fledged codes upon language. A mnemonic technique commonly described in 19th-century primers involved the systematic conversion of a sequence of numbers (or some other abstract order) that needed to be memorized into words that would then be linked together in phrases deemed more memorable than the original numerals. The results of this conversion – and I should stress that I am not trying to trivialize the work of experimental poets with this example – loosely recall, in their jingling inscrutability, avant-garde verse, as here in this typical late 19th-century instance:

Shoot in a fury, ugly Sheriff.
[. . . .]
Heave it off, my sooty deep robe.
A tiny hoop of mamma shook a mummy.
Asian warriors usually weigh each a share.  

80 This example is taken from Alphonse Loisette, Physiological Memory: or, The instantaneous art of never forgetting; (which uses none of the "Localities," "Keys," "Pegs," "Links," "Tables" or "Associations" of "Mnemonics") by Prof. A. Loisette, sole originator, proprietor and teacher thereof, 4th edition (New York: Alphonse Loisette, 1886), 35, 40-41. Related techniques of translating orders or chronologies into sentences (or vice-versa) are outlined in Anonymous [T.W.D.], Mnemonics: or, the New Science of Artificial Memory (New York: James Mowatt and Co., 1844), esp. 37-38; Aimé Paris, Exposition et pratique des procédés de la Mnemotechnie (Paris: Aimé Paris, C. Farcy, 1826), esp. VII and LXXXIII; and Lorenzo D. Johnson, Memoria Technica, 3rd edition (Boston: Gould, Kendall and Lincoln, 1847). Mnemonics were certainly known in
(The first line cited here corresponds to “61284768,” according to the primer’s conversion table; the last three lines are presented in their original sequence.) The eccentricity here might seem to be my own more than the mnemotician’s, but my point in mentioning these curios is simply to suggest how a mnemonic imperative, in asserting its formal dominance within the framework of a sentence or line, might exert radical pressure upon sense. We have already seen how Vertov’s poetry illustrates this tension; we will see later how the photographic “fact” in Vertov’s work of the 1920s will play the role of a “material unit” that can be subjected to well-nigh endless restructuring, while retaining a referential, that is, meaningful, function.

As is well known, the ramifications of the Futurist concern with work upon material, including photographic and other “facts,” were worked through in the pages of the Futurist-led journals of the Left Front of the Arts in the 1920s, specifically LEF and Novyi LEF, both edited by Mayakovsky. It was in the pages of LEF that Vertov published what is arguably his single most important article, “Kinocs: A Revolution” (LEF, June 1923), and significant aspects of Vertov’s thinking about film were presaged, as we will see in Chapter Five, in the pages of the short-lived pre-LEF komfut (Communist-Futurist) paper Art of the Commune (December 1918 to March 1919). Other journals that published and discussed Vertov’s work, especially Constructivist Aleksej Gan’s Kino-Fot (1922), included writing, photos and illustrations by artists like

Russia, and by the time of Vertov’s student years may have been distilled into relatively non-eccentric forms: see, for instance, P.A. Sokolov, Pedagogicheskaia Psikhologiia, 5th edition (St. Petersburg: Ia. Bashmakov, 1913), esp. 90-106.
Mayakovsky, Rodchenko, and Varvara Stepanova, and helped to constitute that Futurist-
Constructivist constellation so important for early Soviet experimental culture. A
controversial participant in the tumultuous meeting about the re-organization of LEF in
January 1925, Vertov was central enough to the loose LEF federation by 1927 for his
face to be represented on an advertising leaflet for Novyi LEF, along with Mayakovsky,
Brik, Eisenstein, Rodchenko, Stepanova, Pasternak, Sergei Tret’iakov and many other
luminaries of the artistic left wing. Thus Vertov’s mature career as a publishing
polemicist and theorist took place primarily within a Futurist-Constructivist milieu;
indeed, he can be counted, with Eisenstein, Kuleshov and Shub, as one of the favored
filmmakers of that milieu.

The Futurist influence upon Vertov explicitly reasserted itself again in the 1930s,
after Mayakovsky’s suicide, when Vertov attempted to align his “ultra-left” and avant-
gardist film practice with the new populism and emphasis on communication and clarity
typical of emergent socialist realism. As we will see in Chapter Nine, the striking and
Stalin-affirmed popularity of Mayakovsky’s poems, along with affinities that Vertov was
able to draw between Mayakovsky’s Futurist work and folk verse, enabled the filmmaker
to assert that his own Futurist-inspired cinematic practice had been affined with the

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81 Work by Rodchenko and/or Stepanova appeared in every issue of Kino-Fot, and
Mayakovsky made appearances in issues 4 and 6. The polemic between the journal
Zrelishcha [Spectacles, 1923-24] and LEF can be seen in retrospect to have taken place
on a field of shared concerns, centering on the relationship between art and industrial
production, the contemporary salience of the category “art” itself, and the status of the
“fact.” See Chapters Five and Six, below.

82 See RGALI f. 2852, op. 1, d. 115; and Chapter Five, below.

83 The leaflet is reproduced in Leah Dickerman, “The Fact and the Photograph,” October
118 (Fall 2006): 132-152; here 132.
“popular” all along. Indeed, it could be said that the strange intertwining of enthusiasm for technology and urbanism with archaism that many critics have noted in Russian Futurist poetry – the sense, that is, that their avant-garde practice amounted to a liberation of primordial linguistic and cultural (or national) possibilities long suppressed – found its most accessible and “classical” expression during the Stalin period, in that era’s amalgams of industrial-technological and folk-national iconographies, as in Three Songs of Lenin, a film made at what turned out to be the terminus of Vertov’s years of peak productivity (1934).

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84 Kino-Eye, 180-187; and Chapter Eight, below.

Finally, “Vertov,” his name, a Futurist mintage, which he began to use both familiarly and as a professional nom de plume no later than 1917-18. It is derived from the Russian verb vertéť’ or (reflexive) vertéť’ sia, “to rotate or turn,” and is cognate with other Russian words like vértel (a “spit” or “skewer”), vertúshka (a “whirligig,” but also a “flirt”), the adjective vertliávyj (“restless” or “frivolous”), as well as some modern coinages, Futurist or Soviet, like vertolyót (the word for “helicopter,” combining “revolve” with “fly” (lyot-)). It has many Indo-European kin, like the Latin verto (“to turn,” but also “to flee,” “to overthrow” and “to interpret”), from which derive our own
“convert,” “invert,” “pervert,” “revert” and so on. Although Mikhail Kaufman once suggested that “Dziga” was an onomatopoetic imitation of the “dz-z-z” sound made by the reel on an editing table (and that “Vertov” referred above all to the crank used to turn the reel), this is a less likely derivation than “(spinning, i.e., toy) top,” which is what dziga means in Ukrainian. Judging by the sound of it, dziga might already mimic the noise of a whirling gadget like a top or a reel; that the word is Ukrainian – not a language spoken in the Kaufman household, to my knowledge – makes me wonder whether it wasn’t bestowed upon David Kaufman by his witty and eloquent friend from Kiev, Moisej Fridliand (aka Mikhail Kol’tsov), though I have no proof that it was. In any event, we are probably not wrong to see the proliferation of spinning and turning things in Vertov’s films (and especially in his most personal film, Man with a Movie Camera) as a kind of autobiographical signature, like Bach’s B-A-C-H or Shostakovich’s D-S-C-H. (On the other hand, of course, the motif of rotation inscribes a larger historical-political idea into an apparently personal name: “revolution,” no less.)

As far as the “-ov” in “Vertov” is concerned, that is of course a standard (genitive) ending characteristic of Russian family names, and perhaps “Vertov” could more accurately be termed a Russo-Futurist neologism. In my experience, it raises few eyebrows among native Russians, despite its artificial origins (though sometimes it is confused for the common surname “Vetrov”). Indeed, like many other Futurist inventions, David Kaufman’s post-revolutionary name fused elements of the Old with the New. “Dziga” is less easy to assimilate, perhaps because it sounds a bit like the Russian

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word for “gypsy” (tsygan), and more like a nickname than a “real” name.\textsuperscript{87} Perhaps sensing the need for a “proper” proper name, Vertov at some point late in the fall of 1918 adopted “Denis Arkad’evich” as his first name and patronymic respectively.\textsuperscript{88} These new monikers retain his original initials “D.A.” – “Dziga,” it will be noted, also begins with “D” and ends with “A” – and in the majority of later official documents he is indicated as either “D.A. Vertov” or “D. Vertov.”

On one level, to be sure, this renaming was an instance of that self-russification embraced by so many young Jews of Vertov’s class and educational background in those years, a token of their entry into what historian Yuri Slezkine has called “the Pushkin religion.”\textsuperscript{89} The transformation, as we have suggested in Chapter One, seems to have been at once a kind of flight response in the face of widespread anti-Semitism, a consequence of genuine attraction to Russian culture, and a way of asserting a distance (though not an absolute one, often) from Jewish beliefs and practices that, for this cohort, held little appeal. His younger brother Moisej had already become “Mikhail” by 1917, and Boris, as indicated in Chapter One, always bore that Russian name. Vertov’s siblings retained “Kaufman,” although all of Dziga’s and Mikhail’s associates in Moscow in the

\textsuperscript{87} Indeed, I suspect that it was a childhood nickname, judging from the way it is used in the extant memoirs.

\textsuperscript{88} The earliest documented reference to “Denis Arkad’evich” I have seen is in Listov, Istoriia smotrit v ob’ektiv (171), and dates to the fall of 1918: later, evidently, than 22 September (see Magidov, “Iz arkhiva Vertova,” 162). It is worth mentioning that, due to the patronymic character of Russian middle names, changing one’s middle name effectively amounts to changing one’s father’s first name as well.

\textsuperscript{89} See Yuri Slezkine, The Jewish Century (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), 127; and the discussion in Chapter One.
‘20s would have known that they were brothers. (We can safely assume that no one thought Mikhail had changed his name to “Kaufman” from “Vertov.”)

Still, there are some interesting ambiguities to be teased out of “Denis Arkad’evich” as well. “Denis” comes to Russian from French, of course, and is the name of a famous 18th century Russian satirical playwright (Denis Fonvizin, 1744/45-1792), and of a well-known Russian Romantic poet-soldier (Denis Davydov, 1799-1837). “Arkadij” (from which “Arkad’evich” derives) was a name used almost exclusively by monks until the second half of the 19th century, and comes from the Greek Arkadios, meaning “Arcadia-dweller”: that is, a shepherd or herdsman, but also (in the well-known literary applications of the toponym) a happy denizen of pastoral paradise, and/or celebrant of the feast of Demeter, goddess of the harvest. As happened with “Tatiana” after the appearance of Pushkin’s Eugene Onegin, “Arkadij” was popularized by a literary prototype, Ivan Turgenev’s eponymous character in Fathers and Sons (1862).90 Thus, “Denis Arkad’evich” has a sophisticated, even literary ring to it, at least to my ear: the name of a fin-de-siècle aesthete, perhaps? In any case, most people who worked with or befriended Vertov in later years always referred to him as “Denis Arkad’evich.” “Dziga” was primarily reserved for polemic and publicity on the one hand, and intimacy (especially with Liza Svilova and Misha and Borya Kaufman) on the other; even his parents called him “Dziga.” Only Masha Gal’pern, now at a distance, evidently persisted in using “Dodia” (the familiar short form for “David”).91

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91 RGALI f. 2091, op. 1, d. 171, l. 1 (letter from Białystok to Svilova in Moscow, dated 14 July 1931); Boris Kaufman Archive, Beinecke Library, Yale University, Box 12, File 214 (letter from Masha Gal’pern to Boris Kaufman of 9 November 1945).
A Job in “Khronika”

It wasn’t until the end of May 1918 that David Kaufman was offered a position, by his old friend and rapidly blossoming journalist Mikhail Kol’tsov, as an office manager and bookkeeper in the Moscow Film Committee.92 As indicated earlier, Kol’tsov was traveling a good deal during 1917-18 – despite never officially withdrawing from the medical faculty of the Psychoneurological Institute until 13 September 191893 - particularly between Petrograd and Kiev, where his parents and brother Boris Efimov were staying.94 He witnessed Lenin’s return to Russia at Petrograd’s Finland Station in April 1917, and in 1918 published vivid descriptive feuilletons about both the February and October Revolutions in the Kiev paper Evening (Vecher).95 His acquaintance with Lunacharsky and Chicherin led not only to coveted newspaper work, but also to his life-long if irregular involvement with non-fiction (khronika) film In February 1918, Kol’tsov was working with Boltianskii in the soon-to-be-dissolved Skobelev Committee’s “social-film” division (discussed below), and traveled that month with cameraman Petr Novitskii

92 Magidov (in Zrimaia Pamiat’ Istorii, 84) cites a form filled out by Vertov where he evidently indicates 28 May as his first day on the job (GARF f. 3524, op. 1, d. 30, l. 22); Letopis’ Rossiiiskogo Kino 1863-1929 gives 30 May as Vertov’s starting date (251), but I have seen no documentary confirmation of this. See also Michelson, ed., Kino-Eye, 40, 119.

93 TsGIASPb f. 155, op. 2, d. 9788, l. 40.


95 Fradkin, op. cit., 33-43.
to Finland to film the struggles between the Finnish Red and White Guards. Shortly after this, he was made chair of the *khronika* division of the All-Russian Cinema Committee of the People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment (Narkompros), the government ministry in charge of culture and education, and famously headed by Lunacharsky.

We have already suggested that David Kaufman may have developed an interest in cinema during his years at the Psychoneurological Institute; we can assume that Kol’tsov hired him for the film-administration position both on the basis of long friendship and because he thought Kaufman would do a good job. The job itself, no doubt, was the important thing for Kaufman. For a poor student in Moscow, and a refugee to boot, survival would have been the primary concern in the spring of 1918. Although the worst was yet to come, Moscow had already experienced famine during the years of the World War, and the transport and supply situation grew worse in 1917 and early 1918 with the ongoing breakdown of state institutions nationwide, the military catastrophes of the summer, the continuing threat from German forces, and the initial Civil War skirmishes in Ukraine and southern Russia. Moscow’s population had begun draining away after May 1917, and by September of that year, the city’s population had

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96 Magidov, Zrimaia Pamiat’ Istorii, 64.

97 Boris Efimov indicates that Kol’tsov went with one D. Manuil’skii to Kiev with the non-fiction/newsreel unit in 1918 (probably after the Brest-Litovsk Treaty of 3 March) (Beliaev et al., eds., Mikhail Kol’tsov, kakim on byl, 79). See also Listov, Istoriiia smotrit v ob’ektiv, 90-92.

98 These disasters were of course a part of that “first demographic catastrophe” (1915-22) described in Chapter Two; for a summary, see P. Polian et al., Gorod i derevnia v evopejskoj Rossii: Sto let peremen (Moscow: OGI, 2001), 40-44.
dropped by almost 200,000, continuing to plummet through at least the middle of 1920, by which time a million people had left, mainly for the countryside.\textsuperscript{99} As a Jew, however, and attached in some way or other to family members stuck in Moscow, David Kaufman would not likely have considered sitting out the hard times in a Russian village; indeed, it is not surprising that the Jewish populations in Russia’s major cities evidently decreased far less than did the general population during the years of the Civil War.\textsuperscript{100}

To be sure, the living situation in Moscow was dangerous as well as precarious. Boris Kaufman recalled that

Moscow had been transformed into a military camp. . . it was impossible to go out into the street because shots were being fired every second. We had to stuff pillows into the window frames . . . .\textsuperscript{101}

\textsuperscript{99} Diane P. Koenker, “Urbanization and Deurbanization in the Russian Revolution and Civil War,” in Koenker, William G. Rosenberg and Ronald Grigor Suny, eds., \textit{Party, State and Society in the Russian Civil War: Explorations in Social History} (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), 81-104; here 90. Most of the decline (of almost 700,000) took place between 1918 and 1920 (ibid., 91). Koenker summarizes: “Over the entire period from February 1917 to August 1920, Moscow’s population dropped by almost one million, a loss of 520,000 males, and 470,000 females. During the same period, there were roughly 110,000 births and 200,000 deaths, a natural decrease of 90,000. Thus, about 900,000 people must have left the city by the summer of 1920” (ibid., 90). Petrograd’s population “plummeted from 2.5 million in 1917 to 700,000 in 1920” (ibid., 81). See also S.G. Wheatcroft and R.W. Davies, “Population,” in R.W. Davies, Mark Harrison, and S.G. Wheatcroft, eds., \textit{The Economic Transformation of the Soviet Union, 1913-1945} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), esp. 62.

\textsuperscript{100} Budnitskij, \textit{Rossijskie evrei}, 102. The diary of Grigorii Boltianskii’s wife Olga, to which I will refer below, narrates her travels with their two children between Petrograd and a village called Vysokoe in the fall of 1918. An ethnic Russian, Olga still spent most of the war with her children in desperately hungry Petrograd (RGALI f. 2057, op. 2, d. 26, ll. 555-557). \textit{Kino-Nedelia} 5 (1918) concludes with a vivid depiction of people crowded together around a Petrograd train station waiting to leave the city.

\textsuperscript{101} “\textit{Entrevue avec Boris Kaufman},” Beinecke Library, Yale University, GEN MSS 562, box 16, folder 336, p. 3. Photographic evidence of the destruction in Moscow is offered in the third part of the Skobelev Committee’s \textit{October Revolution (Oktiabr’skij perevorot, 1917} [RGAKFD 12530]); in \textit{October Socialist Revolution in Moscow and Petrograd} (1917 [RGAKFD 628]); and in \textit{On the events in Moscow in November (K moskovskim
Yet procuring food was and would remain the major problem for residents of both Moscow and Petrograd for some time to come. The average daily ration of bread received by Muscovites declined from one pound to half a pound between early 1917 and the spring of 1919, shrinking at times to a mere eighth of a pound.102 (We will see in Chapters Four and Six how Vertov makes precise historical reference to this “fractioning” of bread in a memorable animated sequence in Stride, Soviet.) People in the city were going hungry, and it is not surprising that Vertov on 1 September 1918 – he was already “Vertov” by then, though he added “Kaufman” in parentheses– indicated on a questionnaire that the only “Soviet institution” he regularly made use of was “the First Soviet Cafeteria.”103

In the same questionnaire, he rather saucily indicates that his main political sympathies – plainly a matter of affinity rather than party membership or even considered

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102 Mauricio Borrero, Hungry Moscow: Scarcity and Urban Society in the Russian Civil War 1917-1921 (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 11, 75-79. On the high levels of famine and/or famine-related death in urban Russia between 1918 and 1920, see Nikolai M. Dronin and Edward G. Bellinger, Climate Dependence and Food Problems in Russia, 1900-1990: The Interaction of Climate and Agricultural Policy and Their Effect on Food Problems (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2005), 93.

103 V.M. Magidov, “Iz arkhiva Vertova,” Kinovedcheskie Zapiski 18 (1993): 161-164; here 163; GARF f. 3524, op. 1, d. 30, l. 22). On the importance of the often unappealingly provisioned cafeterias, see Borrero, Hungry Moscow, 154-160. Vertov’s entry into filmmaking in May 1918 coincided with the declaration of the regime’s “food supply dictatorship” (involving requisitioning peasant grain, compulsory sale of food at fixed prices and much coercion) the same month (Lewis H. Siegelbaum, Soviet state and society between revolutions, 1918-1929 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 42).
conviction – lay with the “anarcho-individualists.”104 It is difficult to know how seriously to take this acknowledgement. Anarchism had had a long and stormy history in Russia, of course, not least in Vertov’s native Bialystok, one of the birthplaces of anarchist activism in the Empire.105 However, Moscow’s anarchists, a disparate group by all accounts, had become targets of repression by the Cheka (the ruthless Communist state security organ) by no later than April 1918.106 Vertov, it seems, gravitated toward the programmatically unsociable and therefore less dangerous “individualists,” whose ideology derived from Max Stirner’s egoistic anti-collectivism.107 The offhand character of Vertov’s response casts doubt on the intensity of his attraction to anarchism in any case; still, if Aleksandr Levitskii is to be believed, he seems to have persisted at least into the early 1920s in supporting and citing the poetic work of the Imaginists, whose openly if apolitically...

104 Magidov, “Iz arkhiva Vertova,” 163. Literally, the question read: “To which party do you belong, or do you belong to no party?” Vertov’s response: “To no party. I sympathize with the anarchist-individualists.”

105 On anarchism in Bialystok, see N.I. Rogdaev, “Kratkij ocherk anarkhicheskogo dvizheniia v Pol’she, Litve i Lifliandii,” in V.V. Shelokhaev et al., eds., Anarkhisty: Dokumenty i materialy, vol. 1 (Moscow: Rosspen, 1998), 413-424, esp. 417-418; and Budnitskii, Rossiiskie Evrei, 46.

106 Evan Mawdsley, The Russian Civil War (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2000), 82. Some traces of anarchism remained for a while: the anarchist-communist leader Apollon Karelin (1863-1926) was a member of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee in 1918, and appears in Vertov’s Brain of Soviet Russia from that year; he was later involved in memorials to Kropotkin in Moscow, and in anarchist journals published abroad. See Paul Avrich, The Russian Anarchists (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967).

107 On anarcho-individualism in Russia, see V.I. Federov-Zabrezhnev, “Propovedniki individualisticheskogo anarkhizma v Rossii,” in Shelokhaev et al., Anarkhisty, 429-443; and V.D. Ermakov and P.I. Talerov, eds., Anarkhizm v istorii Rossii ot istokov k sovremennosti: Bibliograficheskii slovar’-spravochnik (St. Petersburg: Solart, 2007), 517-518.
anarchist attitudes (and posturing) were well known.\textsuperscript{108} What Vertov’s response clearly does suggest, apart from his awareness of anarchism, is that in September 1918, he still felt comfortable proclaiming his personal ideological distance from the regime forming at the time, and for which he was already working: plainly, he did not take a job in the Film Committee because of a quasi-religious conversion to Bolshevism, or indeed because of any particular political commitments. As it turns out, he would never directly express political independence again, at least not in any publicly available or unmediated form. Meanwhile, the language and problematic of Marxism – channeled through Constructivism, official political rhetoric, personal reading, and perhaps other sources – would come to exert its effects upon his filmmaking and his thinking about cinema, powerfully if idiosyncratically.

Vertov was 22 years old when he began working for the Moscow Film Committee. In retrospect, he does not seem to have been easily categorizable in terms of any of the old or new rubrics of social classification on offer in Russia. He had not completed his university studies, and probably was not even a student by that time; he had been drafted, but had not served in the army as a soldier; he had not acquired a profession or professional identity; he had not been involved in the revolutionary movement, and was certainly not a worker or peasant; and though a Jew, he clearly did not regard himself as an observant member of any confessional community. Nor, being a refugee, could he claim even the status of local \textit{intelligent} that his father, past and future

\textsuperscript{108} Krusanov, \textit{Russkii Avangard}, vol. 2, part 1, 357-382.
owner of a large, up-to-date bookstore in Bialystok, probably did claim. Indeed, “refugee” was the only label that really fit him, although being a Bialystoker was perhaps also important in cementing the connection with his *zemliák* (local compatriot or *Landsmann*) Mikhail Kol’tsov.

“To be a refugee,” writes Peter Gatrell,

. . . was to stand outside established boundaries of society, to be waiting on the margins of social life in the hope that one’s status would be resolved, and to become accustomed to new structures of space.\(^{110}\)

To be sure, Vertov was a refugee with certain tools and advantages at his disposal, among them a solid if incomplete education and useful connections. As it turns out, for a refugee to find work in the Commissariat of Enlightenment in those early months was far from unusual, as historian M.B. Kejrim-Markus has shown. Many on staff in the Commissariat were refugees from the Baltics, Poland, and the western and later southern regions of Russia and its empire: young people, overwhelmingly, who had lost their opportunity to get a diploma before the revolution but found a way, Kejrim-Markus asserts, to acquire professional training and do interesting intellectual and cultural work, and eventually make a career, within the confines of the Commissariat.\(^{111}\)

\(^{109}\) His parents’ “estate” identity (townsperson, *meshchanin*) had, of course, been abolished along with all the other estates on 28 October 1917.


In the most general terms, it might be said that Vertov was part of an important cohort of participants in the formation of Soviet society who were too young to claim membership in any wing of the pre-Revolutionary intelligentsia – much less in the revolutionary underground\textsuperscript{112} – and too old to be beneficiaries of the systematic educational and professional promotion of (mainly) workers and peasants that began in earnest in the late 1920s: the \textit{vydvizhentsy} (“promotees”) of the Stalin era, made famous by the work of historian Sheila Fitzpatrick.\textsuperscript{113} I have searched in vain through the existing historical and sociological literature on Russia during this period to find an established term for Vertov’s cohort, despite the fact that many “cultural workers” of the 1920s, including many in the film industry, surely had similar backgrounds.\textsuperscript{114} Think of

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\item[\textsuperscript{112}] Kejrim-Markus indicates that the overwhelming majority of workers in the lower ranks of the Commissariat – mainly clerical and office staff, like Vertov at the outset – were non-Party members; they made up 64 percent of the Commissariat’s total labor force (Gosudarstvennoe Rukovodstvo Kul’turoj, 184).
\item[\textsuperscript{113}] Sheila Fitzpatrick, Education and Social Mobility in the Soviet Union, 1921-1934 (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979); and The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992), esp. 11-15, 141-180.
\item[\textsuperscript{114}] Another possible category, the “lower-middle strata” studied by historian Daniel Orlovsky, does not seem to fit either, insofar as members of those important strata – “white-collar workers, statisticians . . . clerks, sales personnel . . . village school teachers, and middle and lower-level technical personnel” – seem to have already possessed some quasi-professional skills, if not identities, prior to the Bolshevik takeover. At the same time, members of these highly heterogeneous strata did, according to Orlovsky, sympathize with the democratic ideals of the February Revolution and ended up “graft[ing] themselves onto the workers’ and peasants’ revolution and indeed managed to infiltrate a wide range of revolutionary class institutions. The presence of large numbers of intelligentsia, specialists, protoprofessionals, and the like imparted stability, skills, and the promise and reality of an effective apparatus for the new soviet state” (Daniel T. Orlovsky, “State Building in the Civil War Era: The Role of the Lower-Middle Strata,” in Koenker, Rosenberg and Suny, eds., \textit{Party, State and Society in the Russian Civil War}, 180-209; here 181 and 202).
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Eisenstein (who never completed his engineering studies), Boris Barnet (who never finished art school), and Vertov’s brother Mikhail, all of whom were born between 1896 and 1902 and ended up serving, in some capacity or other, in the Red Army before becoming art-workers. But for chronic pleurisy, Vertov would doubtless have served as well; his agit-train work would stand in for that experience, as we will see.\footnote{Again, we know of Vertov’s malady – which had not been of concern to recruiters for the Imperial Army, apparently, or had been contracted later – from the same September 1918 questionnaire (Magidov, “Iz arkhiva Vertova,” 163). Vertov was still subject to recruitment during the Civil War, however, and was spared service only by “serving in the Photo and Film Division of Narkompros” (RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 384, l. 1; dated 17 November 1919). On Red Army service as means of asserting a kind of “proletarian” identity, see Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Class Identities in NEP Society,” in Tear Off the Masks! Identity and Imposture in Twentieth-Century Russia (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), 51-70, esp. 54.}

It would seem that, if Vertov’s case is in any way exemplary, entry into Soviet cultural institutions for this floating cohort was more a matter of luck and connections than of long-standing political conviction (as with the older radicals) or of state policy and practice (as with the \textit{vydvizhentsy} to come). For Vertov, his luck \textit{was} his connection (to Kol’tsov): as his later career would show, he was no master of the vital art of “schmoozing,” and I believe that without Kol’tsov’s intercession, he never would have made films.

We might usefully contrast Vertov’s lack of institutional grounding prior to 1918 with Grigorii Boltianskii’s various points of access into the new regime. Boltianskii, more than a decade older than Vertov, was at once a former schoolteacher (associated with the zemstvos), a political activist affiliated with the Social Democrats, a sometime journalist, an executive member of the Skobelev Committee’s “social non-fiction (\textit{khronika})” division, and, at least through early fall of 1918, a delegate from the
Psychoneurological Institute (where he was still enrolled) at congresses devoted to the reform of higher education.\textsuperscript{116} Boltianskii was surely unusual in being so multiply situated, but I draw the contrast simply in order to suggest how much more organic (in Gramsci’s sense) his participation in the cultural commissariat was, in part because of his age and experience, than Vertov’s considerably more fortuitous involvement. Certainly (and most importantly for us), Boltianskii was among those who had already worked prior to October 1917 to establish the framework within which non-fiction film would be produced in early Soviet Russia. This is the framework into which Vertov stepped in May 1918, and which would largely determine his professional and even artistic identity for the rest of his career – though not, as usual, in any straightforward way.

\textit{Democratic non-fiction}

This is as much as to say that early Soviet newsreel (most often \textit{zhurnál} or \textit{kinozhurnál} in Russian, even in these early years) and what was then known as \textit{khronika} and would later be called “unstaged” or “documentary” film\textsuperscript{117} were not created \textit{ex nihilo}, and certainly not by Dziga Vertov. Soviet non-fiction film was founded primarily on the basis of two pre-Revolutionary predecessors: the shorts and newsreels produced by

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\textsuperscript{116} RGALI f. 2057, op. 2, d. 26, ll. 547, 555. \textit{Kino-Nedelia} 7 (18 July 1918) concluded with a subsection on one these congresses.

\textsuperscript{117} The latter terms did not exist at the time, of course. For a discussion of the terminological problems surrounding “documentary,” see Chapters 5, 6 and the present chapter, below. In the years 1915-1917, the dominant distinction, not especially well developed in film journals or elsewhere, seems to have involved a contrast between \textit{khronika} and “staging” (\textit{instenirovka}): see Roshal’, \textit{Nachalo vsekh nachal}, 132; and some of Boltianskii’s 1917 proposals to the Skobelev Committee (RGALI f. 2057, op. 1, d. 261, ll. 51-52; discussed below).
private firms, particularly Pathé and Gaumont (to be discussed in a later section), and the resources offered by the sole partially state-financed film concern in pre-Revolutionary Russia, the still-understudied Skobelev Committee.

Princess Nadezhda Belosel’skaia-Belozerskaia, sister of the famous General Mikhail Skobelev, founded the latter institution after the 1905 Russo-Japanese War as a philanthropic organization to help wounded and crippled soldiers. The Committee, part of the culture and education division of the War Ministry, enjoyed state patronage and some state funding, published postcards and photographic albums, released phonograph records, and from March 1914 operated a cinema division with offices in both Moscow and Petrograd that produced short films about the Russian combatant service and the conditions on the front. It had a monopoly over military non-fiction production from 1914 through the end of 1916, and briefly contracted private cinema entrepreneurs to make its films, until it bought its own equipment and began independent production.118

During those two years, the Committee produced fiction and educational films, a number

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of short, well-advertised non-fiction films, and at least two longer non-fiction films about the war.\textsuperscript{119}

As indicated in Chapter Two, the film branch of the Skobelev Committee, renamed the Social Non-Fiction (\textit{sotsial’naia khronika}) Section of the Skobelev Educational Committee, continued and intensified its work after the February Revolution under the direction of Grigorii Boltianskii. Boltianskii headed up the Social Non-Fiction section from the end of March 1917, and on 25 April received an official mandate to represent the Petrograd Soviet on the Committee, now operating under the auspices of the Education Ministry, from the well-known Lev Karakhan, a future Soviet diplomat and victim of the Great Terror. Karakhan was at that time still affiliated with Menshevism and its strategy of cautious cooperation with bourgeois liberals, advocacy of parliamentary participation, and broad involvement with trade unionists and non-Party activists.\textsuperscript{120} Mensheviks and members of the Socialist Revolutionary Party (SRs) dominated the Petrograd Soviet at this point, and both its composition and other evidence suggest that Boltianskii was attached to the Menshevik rather than Bolshevik wing of the

\textsuperscript{119} \textit{Pod Russkim Znamenem} (Under the Russian Banner) (probably 1915) and \textit{Vtoraia Otechestvennaia Voina 1914-1915 Godov} (The Second Patriotic War of 1914-1915) (1916) (Ginzburg, op. cit., 183). Pathé and Gaumont news shorts covering the Western front were widely shown in Russia as well (ibid., 187). Production was complicated by the fact that the Committee’s studio was located in Moscow, while the film lab was in Petrograd (Magidov, \textit{Zrimaia Pamiat’ Istorii}, 59). For inventories of the Skobelev Committee’s films made through the end of 1917, see RGALI f. 2057, op. 1, d. 256, ll. 22ob-30ob.

\textsuperscript{120} Magidov, \textit{Zrimaia Pamiat’ Istorii}, 57; RGALI f. 2639, op. 1, d. 63, l. 8. Karakhan joined the Bolsheviks the following month.
SD Party. In any event, it was under the supervision of a politically motley group –
left-tending former monarchist V.I. Dement’ev, previously in the War Ministry; the
Menshevik V.K. Ikov; and one Marianov of the Socialist Revolutionary Party -- that
Boltianskii directed the filming of longer works like The National Funeral of the Heroes
and Victims of the Great Russian Revolution, and starting in June headed up the
Provisional Government’s popular newsreel series Svobodnaia Rossiia (Free Russia), to
be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

As indicated in Chapter Two, personnel from both the Skobelev Committee and
private cinema firms, particularly cameramen, would go on to work on Kino-Nedelia in

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121 Magidov, Zrimaia Pamiat’ Istorii, 59; Alexander Rabinowitch, The Bolsheviks come
to Power: The Revolution of 1917 in Petrograd (New York and London: W.W. Norton,
1976), 76-77; Rabinowitch, The Bolsheviks in Power: The First Year of Soviet Rule in
Petrograd (Bloomington and Indianapolis: 2007), 226. A. Shved, a friend who supported
Boltianskii’s petition to join the Communist (Bolshevik) Party in 1930, indicated that
Boltianskii had abjured Menshevism in 1912, but this seems unlikely, given that he was
still writing for Menshevik papers in 1913 (RGALI f. 2639, op. 1, d. 63, l. 2; d. 3, ll. 5-6).
Bolshevik representation in the Soviet increased sharply in the fall of 1917, and with it,
the Soviet’s intransigence.

122 Leyda, op. cit., 98.

123 At the beginning of March, a large group of foreign and domestic private film
companies together with the Skobelev Committee produced a long chronicle film of the
February Revolution in Moscow, Velikie Dni Revoliutsii v Moskve 28 fevralia-4 marta
1917 г. (Magidov, Zrimaia Pamiat’ Istorii, 57). The Skobelev Committee also produced a
remarkable pseudo-documentary entitled Tsar Nicholas II, Autocrat of All of Russia, a
scripted film which juxtaposed acted scenes and archival footage for satirical effect
(Ginzburg, op. cit., 347.) 13 issues of Svobodnaia Rossiia appeared, covering events from
5 June to 2 October 1917 (Magidov, op. cit., 59), though only two, numbers 5 (June
1917: devoted to showing the demonstrations going on in Petrograd at the time) and 11
(September 1917: about the show trial of former war minister and convicted spy V.A.
Sukhomlinov) have survived (Ginzburg, op. cit., 344), neither in complete form; see
Chapter Four for a more detailed discussion.
but what sorts of practices and attitudes would they bring to that earliest “Soviet” newsreel? Judging from the instructions received by the Committee’s Social Newsreel workers, most of their time was spent on what seem like straightforward matters of organization and newsgathering. The newsreel supervisor (Boltianskii) was to formulate and give precise instructions to his staff, attend important shoots, secure permissions to film, compose intertitles, and identify usable footage already on hand. His assistant was to read over the morning and evening newspapers, making notes and extracts and getting a sense of what would be happening on a given day. The cameramen - usually two, with Petr Novitskii in charge –would provide technical advice, keep records of what was filmed and how much stock was used, while shooting “lively scenes that convey the [given] situation and mood, trying to incorporate a variety of cinematic techniques [priemy].” The entire working collective was to gather together twice a week to watch rushes and discuss problems and ways to improve the newsreel.125

Directives of this sort seem relatively neutral, practical, and unsurprising. However, more programmatic statements made by Committee members make it clear that the Social Newsreel was to be truly “social” in its political orientation as well. Analysis of these statements, involving a certain amount of theoretical as well as historical

124 Magidov (in Zrimaia Pamiati Istori, 59) has shown that by July, the Skobelev Committee’s cinema section was divided into several units in both Moscow and Petrograd, involving such important figures as (in Petrograd) Boltianskii and cameraman Petr Novitskii and (in Moscow) cameraman Aleksandr Levitskii and director Vladislav Starevich. Aleksandr Lemberg (of the Persky film), Ianis Dored (Pathé), Petr Ermolov (Gaumont), Eduard Tisse (Skobelev Committee), and Mark Izrail’son-Naletnyi (Khanzhonkov) were among the other experienced cameramen who shot extensive footage for Kino-Nedelia (see Listov, op. cit., 78; and RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 5, l. 5-7; d. 6, l. 3).

125 RGALI f. 2057, op. 1, d. 260, ll. 1-2.
elaboration, will help us to tease out some of the fundamental ideological matrices, linking the activity of filmmakers and their public to interpretations of wider social and political dynamics, out of which Vertov’s cinema emerged.126

One document, a kind of policy proposal written by Boltianskii in April 1917, is particularly illuminating in this respect and needs to be quoted as length:

The political revolution . . . has led to a fundamental break in [the trajectory of] cinema affairs. The ideological shift brought about by these enormous events has roused different spiritual needs among filmgoers, and has led, as a consequence, to an entirely changed marketplace demand. Political and social-economic questions are now at the center of attention of ordinary people, and will remain so for some time due to the [future] convocation and work of the Constituent Assembly.

In formulating this necessary, new conception of cinema affairs, and in these changed conditions, it is also important to keep in mind that, over the course of these events, the democracy [demokratia] – foremost, the working class as a cultural force, as well as the army and the peasantry – have been moved to the front of the stage.

All of this gives full opportunity to those who are closely associated with cinema and who are able correctly to find the beating pulse of living life [b’iushchijsia pul’s zhivoj zhizni] to determine the nature of the work that now needs to be done.

It is necessary by the same token to remember that the data we have on hand indicate that up to around 70 percent of all spectators are comprised of members of the working class and urban townspeople [meshchanstvo], with the latter group comprised mainly of women.127 A still larger part of both of these groups now has the opportunity to go to movie theaters ([due to] higher salaries and rations provided by the state).

This entire contingent belongs entirely to the democracy and has its own particular interests and needs, which ought to be satisfied. Moreover, as a consequence of the [new] role of the democracy, members of the other, less numerous classes of society are showing an intensified interest in its activities.

126 For a discussion of another important presentation by Boltianskii (at the Second All-Russian Conference of Cinema Workers, 22-23 August 1918), see Taylor, Politics of the Soviet Cinema, 24-25.

127 Regrettably, I have no other information about the Committee’s data on cinema audiences in 1917. For scholarship and reflection on cinema spectatorship in Russia in this period, see Listov, Rossiia, Revoliutsiia, Kinematograf, 14-16 (cited in Chapter Two); and Yuri Tsivian [trans. Alan Bodger], “Early Russian Cinema and its Public,” Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television 11:2 (1991): 105-120.
All of this points to the kind of material that the screen ought to reflect, and to what it must draw upon creatively.

First, political newsreel about the life of the democracy, which swiftly and in timely fashion reflects and develops [newsreel] items about the most important political [events] of the day.

Second, concerning fiction film production (that relates to the liberated situation of the new Russia) . . . we need to develop a new cinematic form for scripts based on political pamphlets, as well as adaptations of colorful social novels relevant to a given moment, alongside representations of lively moments from revolutionary history.

All of this work must be concentrated in a single division, in order to ground [production] on a single administrative basis and thereby to win in the marketplace a solid brand-name reputation artistically, in terms of content, and in terms of political literacy [v smysle politicheskoj gramotnosti].

Today, organizing a special film division – a worker’s division and division of political propaganda – might have enormous historical significance and bring great popularity to the first cinema concern that establishes such a division in the proper way. In this regard, it is worth remembering the enormous demand today for books of social-economic and political content; cinema, answering to the same burning questions of the day, will doubtless attract at least as much if not more attention than books. Many important [historical] moments have already been lost to preservation on film, and . . . negatives [of newsreel footage] . . . could well have enormous value for museum collections. One need only recall not only the first days of the revolution and the birth of a new order, but the meetings among various groups of [political] émigrés, the historic opening of the Sejm in free Finland, the congress of provincial soviets of workers’ and soldiers’ deputies (with speeches by Plekhanov and French and English socialist delegations), the women’s, teachers’, cooperative and railroad workers’ congresses, and the enormous meetings.128

The first thing to notice here is that, in conceptualizing what he believes to be a new, emergent kind of spectator, Boltianskii employs the term “democracy” in a sense unfamiliar to us today, but common in Russia in 1917, when “democracy” was a true ideologeme: that is, an object of discursive-political struggle.129 Rather than some

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128 RGALI f. 2057, op. 1, d. 261, ll. 51-51ob.

minimal set of procedures available to a citizenry for the purposes of (usually rather limited) political decision-making – classically, periodically voting for “representatives” who are to constitute a given polity’s governing body – “democracy” here refers to a specific constituency, to “the democracy,” helpfully if not unambiguously identified by Boltianskii as “foremost, the working class as a cultural force, as well as the army and the peasantry.” As historian Boris Kolonitskii has shown, socialists in particular frequently placed “democracy” in opposition not to "dictatorship" (diktatura), "police state" (politeiskoe gosudarstvo), and the like, but rather to "privileged elements" (tsenzovye elementy), "the ruling classes" (praviashchie klassy), and, quite often, "the bourgeoisie" (burzhuaziia).130

The democracy, in other words, was neither a structure nor a set of procedures but a relatively specific content, made up of “the aggregate of the working masses and the socialist intelligentsia supporting the Soviets.”131


130 Boris Ivanovich Kolonitskii, “‘Democracy’ in the Political Consciousness of the February Revolution,” Slavic Review 57.1 (Spring 1998): 95-106; here 100. Kolonitskii adds, “The position of the socialists sometimes influenced even the language of liberal publications. Thus Birzhevye vedomosti [Stock Exchange News] called the Executive Committee of the Soviet of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies ‘the managing organ of democracy.’ The equating of ‘democracy’ with the socialists could be found also in Menshevik I. G. Tsereteli’s speeches to the Constituent Assembly. He said that ‘the internecine civil war of democracy, which with the hands of one part destroys the achievements of all of democracy, even surrenders it trussed by the arms and legs of the bourgeoisie.’ As we see, ‘democracy’ was contrasted to the ‘bourgeoisie,’ and even at this time and in this situation he unconditionally included the Bolsheviks in the camp with ‘democracy’” (ibid., 101).

131 Ibid., 101. Again, it is crucial to keep in mind that democracy in 1917 could indeed also mean a “form of government,” “universal suffrage,” as it did, for instance, for the exiled SR Mark Vishniak. Socialists – including SR leader Chernov, Menshevik leader Martov, and even, as we will see below, Lenin – used the word “in protean fashion,
This usage seems peculiar to us primarily because of the near-total victory, in our age of “democratic states,” of the procedural ideology of democracy most succinctly expressed in economist Joseph Schumpeter’s notion of “the democratic method” as “free competition among would-be leaders for the vote of the electorate.”¹³² In fact, as classicist M.I. Finlay has shown, the vacillations of democracy (“rule by the demos, the people”) go back to democratic Athens and the word demos itself, which meant among other things “‘the people as a whole’ (or the citizen-body to be more precise) and ‘the common people’ (the lower 13 classes).”¹³³ It is an inflection of this second sense, of demokratiia as (most broadly) “the revolutionary lower classes,”¹³⁴ that socialists like Boltianskii employed most frequently during this period. That specific group has now “been moved,” punctually, “to the front of the stage,” and it is this that constitutes the “fundamental break” to which cinema must now presumably respond.

referring sometimes to a class or a presumed constituency . . . and sometimes to representative procedures”; see Jane Burbank, Intelligentsia and Revolution: Russian Views of Bolshevism 1917-1922 (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 63 and (here) 95).


A closer reading of Boltianskii’s statement, however, reveals ambiguities in his picture of the post-revolutionary spectator that make that “break” more difficult to characterize. The constituency of demokratiia as described here seems inherently, and perhaps indefinitely, to enlarge, in a dynamic announced by that slippery “foremost” (“foremost, the working class . . .”). We learn, for instance, that the democracy includes not only “members of the working class” but also “urban townspeople” (meshchanstvo: that is, the estate to which David Kaufman and his family belonged), and particularly women residing in the city: in class terms, a broad category indeed. Later in his statement, when he comes to suggest specific kinds of film work, Boltianskii incorporates Russia’s vast imperial horizon into demokratiia as well, when he proposes that the new “screen newspaper” depict events “from the life of the great multinational democracy of Russia.”

Similarly, what we might call the consciousness or ethos of demokratiia dilates or contracts unpredictably in Boltianskii’s brief account, calling into question the degree to which with “those [professionals] . . . closely associated with cinema” are truly “able correctly to find the beating pulse of living life” in a particular social locus. Boltianskii assumes a new, common interest in “social-economic and political content,” linking that new interest to society’s preparation for engagement with the Constituent Assembly to come. Indeed, at least three of the major productions of the post-February Skobelev

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135 RGALI f. 2057, op. 1, d. 261, l. 51ob. There may be some ambiguity here – that is, some reference to procedural democracy – given that “the Provisional Government [. . .] established voting rights for all – men and women, nationalities and classes – in one of its first proclamations” (Marianne Kamp, The New Woman in Uzbekistan: Islam, Modernity and Unveiling under Communism (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2006), 13).
Committee were pedagogical films instructing viewers in democratic (in our habitual sense) participation.

One such film, shot by Novitskii and probably supervised by Boltianskii, was entitled Toward the Opening of the Constituent Assembly (1917) and was devoted primarily to the demonstrations in support of the Assembly that took place on 28 November in Petrograd: the day the Assembly was to have convened, about two weeks after the elections to the Assembly (which saw 40 percent of the votes going to the SRs, and 24 percent to the Bolsheviks), and almost a month after the Bolshevik insurrection.\footnote{Suny, The Soviet Experiment, 59.}

The film (a fragment of which has survived) combined news footage of some of the main participants in the demonstrations – former Petrograd Duma chief Grigorii Shreider, representatives from various Russian provinces, the massive crowds and their encounter at the Taurida Palace (seat of the Provisional Government and the Petrograd Soviet) with guards loyal to Soviet power, even a final, self-referential image of the members of the Skobelev Committee’s own “social section of fictional-feature film” [sotsial’naia sektsiia khudozhestvennoj kinematografii] – with more generically instructional footage of pre-election canvassing and agitation, the hanging of posters, and meetings.\footnote{RGALI f. 2057, op. 1, d. 261, l. 61; for the existing fragment, see RGAKFD 11502. Svobodnaia Rossiiia also contained brief agitational segments showing the activities (speeches, distributing pamphlets) of political activists (see issue 5 from 3 July 1917 [RGAKFD 12377]).}

\textit{Elections to the Constituent Assembly} (1917) is a remarkable staged film devoted to explaining voting eligibility and registration procedures. A middle-aged woman clasps her hands after being told her by officials sitting at a table that her mentally ill nephew is
not permitted to vote; a young man is rejected because he's not yet 20 years old; a man of Asian appearance is turned away because he's a foreigner; an older man (clearly an actor, or at least a ham) has been deprived of the right to vote due to being a "fraudulent bankrupt"; and a smiling, youthful soldier turns out to enjoy full voting rights despite being younger than 20, due his military service. Another brief section, involving some unusually elaborate camera movement and cutting for the day, explains how to fill out a vote; it culminates in the bearded, very patriarchal-looking "Stepan Petrovich Kotov" learning from a woman official that he's not allowed to vote on behalf of his wife. This was the sort of “political newsreel about the life of the democracy,” alongside adaptations of “social novels” and works of political satire – evidently replacing Tsarist-era newsreel, fictional melodrama, and screen comedy respectively – that Boltianskii was proposing as one of the main genre frameworks for the new post-February cinema.

However, he additionally argues not only that this new “material” reflects the life and interests of the democracy, but that it attracts “members of the other, less numerous classes of society” as well – thereby drawing them, on the level of consciousness and concern, within the circle of democracy (in Boltianskii’s sense). At the same time, that *demokratiiia* makes up around 70 percent of film audiences at present blurs the boundaries from the other direction. After all, if so much of the film audience is of

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138 Vyborg v Uchreditel'noe Sobranie, 1917 (RGAKFD 12214); the director and release date of the film are unknown, but Boltianskii was likely somehow involved in its making. The importance of women voters was stressed frequently in post-February political actualities: see, for instance, Demonstratsiia v Petrograde za Uchreditel'noe Sobranie (1917 [RGAKFD 578]). The third film was entitled Toward the Government of the People (K narodnoi vlasti (1917), which may have used some of the same footage as Constituent Assembly; see RGALI f. 2057, op. 1, d. 261, l. 47). I will return below to the Constituent Assembly film and the demonstration it portrays.

139 RGALI f. 2057, op. 1, d. 261, l. 52.
“democratic” background already, it would seem that the films answering to current “marketplace demand” (rynochnyi spros) must satisfy some of their “spiritual needs” (zaprosy) as well. Can the ruptures Boltianskii identifies, whether temporal (before/after the February Revolution) or social (between demokratiia and all the “less numerous classes”) be so easily demarcated?

I would argue that these boundaries are, in fact, purposefully – or better, necessarily – represented as porous. For Boltianskii and fellow Marxists of whatever party, the working contingent comprising “the democracy” stands in a special, intimate proximity to the core of social life as such, namely, to production (of goods, of services, of families, of value tout court). The productive and self-organizing activity of that contingent, therefore, will have a special relationship to whatever shape the new revolutionary society will take, now that a dominant but unproductive minority has been pushed to the sidelines, allowing for a novel and newly conscious configuration of society by those who have been generating its fundamental content, and much of its form, all along.

Yet such replacement of one dominant group or class by another can hardly be taken as the terminus of an emancipatory Marxist politics that would set the dissolution of class-based inequality, injustice and conflict – of class itself – as its goal. Thus, we can discern in Boltianskii the envisioning of a crucial double movement of convergence, within the confines of a reflection on film spectatorship, between the large but still limited demokratiia and a vaster, strictly boundless whole that would both eventually incorporate and be politically activated by demokratiia itself. Even the relatively undifferentiated film-going public of April 1917, drawn to any and all current (i.e., non-
“revolutionary”) film, carries the seeds of social transformation, insofar as “the
democracy” vibrates within it; meanwhile, the interests and discourse of the more
organized and visible demokratiia, now a true social movement “at the front of the
stage,” pulls all the “less numerous” classes toward itself, as it changes the whole of
society through its action, thereby fulfilling its function as an “avant-garde.” Fully
gauging the importance of this convergence, however – or what might be better called an
oscillation, on the level of ideological focus, between specific class and larger multitude
– requires a somewhat deeper inquiry into aspects of the Marxist tradition that informed
socialist thought and practice in 1917-18 and beyond.

That tradition has another familiar term, namely “proletariat,” which, since Marx
and Engels, has drifted revealingly between the poles of this binary, though not, as
philosopher Étienne Balibar has shown in a series of brilliant writings, without tension or
contradiction. On the one hand, the proletariat is in fact simply humanity, the mass or
multitude, which emerges – as a concept or a horizon, rather than as a representation –
primarily through the “negative” action of capitalism, through capitalism’s capacity
endlessly to connect and disconnect, to dissolve old identities and endlessly to shape new
ones; and this, Balibar maintains, is the primary meaning of “proletariat” for Marxism.140
In 1844, Marx defined the proletariat as simply “[the] dissolution of society as a
particular estate”;141 and four years later, with Engels, he wrote in the Manifesto:

140 Étienne Balibar, The Philosophy of Marx, trans. Chris Turner (London and New York:
Verso, 2007), 51.

141 From the “Introduction” to A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of
Right [http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm].
The bourgeoisie cannot exist without continually revolutionizing the instruments of production, hence the relations of production, and therefore social relations as a whole. . . . The continual transformation of production, the uninterrupted convulsion of all social conditions, a perpetual uncertainty and motion distinguish the epoch of the bourgeoisie from all earlier ones. All the settled age-old relations are dissolved; all newly formed ones become outmoded before they can ossify. . . . [The bourgeoisie] must get a foothold everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere.142

The human condition brought about by these dynamics, for the overwhelming majority at any rate, is one that should be called “proletarian” in the most general sense.143

On the other hand, and because this transformation does not happen evenly or all at once, the proletariat is a specific class – that is, the industrial working class – with particular interests, outlook, and culture, which can attain political power only through a concerted struggle against the property-owning classes. This is a group with a special relationship to the production and distribution of value, to capitalism, and therefore, to history. The Manifesto again:

With the development of industry the proletariat not only increases; it is forced together in greater masses, its power grows and it feels it more. The interests, the circumstances of life within the proletariat become ever more similar . . . the confrontations between individual workers and individual bourgeois increasingly take on the character of confrontation between two classes.144

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144 Ibid., 9; emphases mine.
Thus, on the one hand, the elimination of existing social relations and the generation of a new “whole” or universal, a mass; on the other (but at the same time), the creation of two particular and antagonistic classes, whose political-economic struggle culminates either (quoting the Manifesto yet again) in “a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.”

Those who know the Manifesto well will already have realized that I have teased apart strands within a text that weaves them together continually; thus,

. . . as we have seen, there are whole sections of the ruling class dumped into the proletariat as a result of the advance of industry, or at least threatened in their essential circumstances.

. . . at the time when the class struggle comes to a head, the process of dissolution within the ruling class, within the whole of the old society, takes on such a violent and striking character that a part of the ruling class renounces its role and commits itself to the revolutionary class, the class that holds the future in its hands. As in the past when a part of the nobility went over to the bourgeoisie, so now a part of the bourgeoisie goes over to the proletariat, in particular, a part of the bourgeois ideologists who have worked out a theoretical understanding of the whole historical development.

All previous movements were movements of minorities or in the interest of minorities. The proletarian movement is the independent movement of the vast majority in the interests of that vast majority.

To be sure, this drift or “vacillation” characterizes Marx’s thought on the historicity of social change from its beginnings, as Balibar has clearly demonstrated (I have drawn my examples mainly from the Manifesto for convenience’s sake alone). And although I am

145 Ibid., 2.
146 Ibid., 10-11.
147 See especially Balibar’s “The Vacillation of Ideology in Marxism,” “In Search of the Proletariat: The Notion of Class Politics in Marx,” and “Politics and Truth: The Vacillation of Ideology, II” in Masses, Classes, Ideas: Studies on Politics and Philosophy
attempting here to identify a general matrix emerging from a tradition of radical thought, the problematic of the relationship between class particularity and “mass” universality was absolutely salient for the protagonists of 1917, as we can see in this passage from The State and Revolution, on which Lenin worked (but never finished) in that revolutionary year:

Democracy means equality. The great significance of the proletariat's struggle for equality and of equality as a slogan will be clear if we correctly interpret it as meaning the abolition of classes. But democracy means only formal equality. And as soon as equality is achieved for all members of society in relation to ownership of the means of production, that is, equality of labor and wages, humanity will inevitably be confronted with the question of advancing farther, from formal equality to actual equality, i.e., to the operation of the rule “from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.” By what stages, by means of what practical measures humanity will proceed to this supreme aim we do not and cannot know. But it is important to realize how infinitely mendacious is the ordinary bourgeois conception of socialism as something lifeless, rigid, fixed once and for all, whereas in reality only socialism will be the beginning of a rapid, genuine, truly mass forward movement, embracing first the majority and then the whole of the population, in all spheres of public and private life.148

Indeed, Lenin’s formulation of the problem in The State and Revolution – where he offers a “phase” model of the transition to communism, in which the passage to the “higher phase” is made possible both by high levels of educational, technological and economic development, and by the prior, forcible undoing of capitalist economic

before and after Marx, trans. James Swenson (New York: Routledge, 1994), 88-123, 125-149, 151-174, 233-240; esp. 92-100 and 142-149; and the discussion (drawing on texts from Capital) of the “negation of the negation” in The Philosophy of Marx, 81-83. Other Marxist texts shaped by this problematic include The German Ideology (1846; first published 1932) and the “Introduction” to A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right (1844). On the latter text, see Balibar, The Philosophy of Marx, 51-54, and Peter Osborne, How to Read Marx (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 2006), 55-69.

relations, and their attendant inequality, by a “dictatorship of the proletariat” – draws a
clear strategic line between the class agency of “armed workers” who will vanquish
“capitalist habits,” and the mass freedom (“embracing . . . the whole of the population”)
that will emerge once all state formations, democratic or otherwise, have been rendered
obsolete through the masses’ seizure of and mastery over the means of production.

All too clear, perhaps – inasmuch as the “phase” model seems to imply a rigorous
if temporary isolation of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” from any exterior classes
while it does its vital work.149 Evidently, a mechanism for concentrating and focusing
that class interest like a laser beam – an interest that, once acted upon, would have
transformative consequences for the whole of society – would be required. That
mechanism would emerge as a Party-State, which would eventually take upon itself the
fundamentally economic task of defining and maintaining the lines separating “classes,”
whose identities were much disordered between 1918 and 1921, from one another.150 (By

149 Foreshadowing of this conception appears in Marx, to be sure: see, for instance, The
Class Struggles in France, 1848-1850.

150 “[I]n the factory and soldiers’ committees, the workers’ militia units and above all the
soviets of workers’, soldiers’ and peasants’ deputies, Lenin discerned the seeds of the
future socialist order and the corresponding state formation, ‘which is no longer a state in
the proper sense of the term, for . . . these contingents of armed men are the masses
themselves, the entire people.’ As for other public functions, the process of centralizing
and therefore simplifying administration had proceeded so far under capitalism, that they
could be performed by any literate person. Therefore it would be possible “to cast
‘bossing’ aside and to confine the whole matter to the organization of the proletarians (as
the ruling class), which will hire “workers, foremen and bookkeepers” in the name of the
whole of society.’ . . . But, as suggested by the implicit contradiction between ‘the
proletarians’ and the ‘whole of society,’ such qualifications as ‘in the proper sense of the
word’ and the use of inverted commas, this model . . . was not without its own
ambiguities. . . .The theorization of the proletarian dictatorship . . . rested on both a
profound sense of the proletariat’s historic mission and an acute awareness of the
limitations of that class. Rather than admitting their audaciousness, the Bolsheviks sought
to compensate for the proletariat’s weakness by assiduously building up what in their
no means has this problematic vanished from the contemporary political sphere, despite all appearances to the contrary. The order that we call “neoliberal,” and know as our own, involves a different kind of systematic separation of the sphere of the economic – now conceived, by that order’s ideologues, in largely technocratic rather than explicitly class terms – from popular control.)

Translating into literary categories, we might say that the work of the Party-State involved, on this level, less the imposition of some “utopian” plan, and more specifically the construction-and-identification of narrative protagonists, whose purity and distinctiveness had to be implacably affirmed until (in Lenin’s words) “actual equality” had been achieved. This was indeed one practical strategy for arresting the vacillations in the notion of the proletariat that we have discussed, but at the cost of simplifying that conception, and of creating another protagonist (or author) in the shape of the Party-State itself. The extent to which these protagonists could be seen primarily as agents or even view all ruling classes required, namely, a powerful state” (Lewis H. Siegelbaum, Soviet State and Society between Revolutions, 1918-1929 (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 9-10, 12). See also Sheila Fitzpatrick, “The Bolshevik Invention of Class,” in Tear Off the Masks! Identity and Imposture in Twentieth-Century Russia (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), 29-50; Christopher R. Browning and Lewis H. Siegelbaum, “Frameworks for Social Engineering: Stalinist Schema of Identification and the Nazi Volksgemeinschaft,” in Michael Geyer and Sheila Fitzpatrick, eds., Beyond Totalitarianism: Stalinism and Nazism Compared (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 231-265; and Balibar, “In Search of the Proletariat,” Masses, Classes, Ideas, 147-148.

Whether the very emergence of “the economy” as a distinct sphere of praxis inaugures this process is not a question I can address here. On the transformation of Marxists in power into “Weberians in substance,” see Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory, 2\textsuperscript{nd} edition (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 109.
forces or processes, rather than substantialized as “subjects,” is an issue that will preoccupy us later in these pages, especially when we turn to the 1930s.¹⁵²

Thus, behind Boltianskii’s description of contemporary “cinema affairs” and filmgoers’ new “spiritual needs” lies an extremely tense ideological configuration, one that stresses radical class difference operating dynamically within and toward a horizon of absolute universality. For socialists committed to parliamentary politics, the Constituent Assembly, forcibly dissolved by the Bolsheviks in January 1918, was to have functioned as one of the major battlegrounds of struggle for the wider hegemony of “the democracy.”¹⁵³ Boltianskii depicts cinema as another such battleground, where already-existing commercial concerns would presumably vie with “social” film production – whose appeal, Boltianskii thinks, can be attested – for the attention of spectators.

In other words, even if demokratiia drives “the beating pulse of living life,” as Boltianskii clearly suggests it does, a “social” (or indeed, socialist) film practice cannot conceive of itself simply as an agent of demokratiia speaking to demokratiia, for at least three reasons. First, as we have seen, the ambit of a revolutionary socialist politics can never simply amount to a takeover of the state by a specific class – in accord, that is, with

¹⁵² Conversely, and in relation to the contemporary neoliberal situation, it may be that the now-familiar denunciations of “grand narratives” – a codeword for “Marxism,” ninety-nine percent of the time – have as an additional effect an attenuation of the capacity for giving narrative form to a given political-economic conjuncture, thereby rendering the crises of the current order insusceptible to effective public articulation. For what I take to be a strong appeal for the reassertion of this capacity, see Corey Robin, “Reclaiming the Politics of Freedom,” The Nation (25 April 2011); http://www.thenation.com/article/159748/reclaiming-politics-freedom. The recent emergence in public discourse of the opposition between "99 and one percent" can clearly be read as part of such a reassertion.

Aristotle’s derisive notion of democracy as “where the poor rule” – but rather moves toward the elimination of class distinctions and the emergence of liberated conditions for “the whole of the population,” a horizon of political aspiration at once utopian and (as history would show) ideological. This is an aspiration, I should add, that found remarkable cinematic expression even under the Bolshevik regime, and not only in Vertov’s work: much of the great and lasting power of Eisenstein’s Battleship Potemkin (1925) resides, I think, in its ecstatic representation of precisely this kind of mass convergence in the long central sequence on Odessa’s waterfront, and of its fragility, as demonstrated in the legendary and terrifying “Steps” scene, in the face of organized brute force.

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154 In this connection, it is interesting to note that in November 1917, when Lenin and Trotsky were already threatening in all seriousness to employ “Jacobin”-style violence against their class enemies, one astute socialist critic went directly for the jugular and derided their “references to the French revolution with the rejoinder that, for all their talk about a socialist revolution, the Bolsheviks were in fact ‘entrapped in purely bourgeois forms of political revolution’” (Rabinowitch, The Bolsheviks in Power, 78). The critic was Left SR Sergei Mstislavskii, who later became Molotov’s official biographer. It is also the case, however, that what would later be known as “White” forces had already occupied important regions of southern Russia and Ukraine by this time; see the discussion of the agit-trains, below.

155 Among many others, the aforementioned Trotsky offered strong assertions of the finitude of proletarian rule: “And what sort of culture will there be [under socialism]? Proletarian? No, it will be a socialist culture; for the proletariat, in contrast to the bourgeoisie, cannot and does not wish to remain forever the hegemonic class. On the contrary, it took power that it might more quickly cease to be the proletariat. Under socialism there is no proletariat, but instead a powerful, advanced and professional [kul’turnaiia] cooperative working association [artel’], and thus a cooperative-associative – or socialist – culture” (L. Trotskij, Voprosy kul’turoj raboty (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel’stvo, 1924), 70-71). See also his Kul’tura i sotsializm (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel’stvo, 1926), 182; and Lenin’s famous and fateful remarks on socialism as the "annihilation of classes" in "Ekonomika i politika v epokhu diktatury proletariata," published in both Pravda (250) and Izvestia (260) on 7 November 1919.
Second, and keeping in mind restrictions on circulation on the one hand, and the barriers presented by literacy and linguistic difference on the other – the latter of which, in particular, Vertov would attempt to overcome by fashioning a wordless “universal language of cinema” in *Man with a Movie Camera* – the *signs* (visual, textual, aural) generated by social newsreel or any other film practice are in fact available to everyone, regardless of the intended direction of the filmmakers’ address, and thus have to be thought of as discursively destined for some more undefined mass (or “public”) as well.\(^{156}\) Certainly, this last principle – a truism only on first glance, as I hope to show in later chapters – from the beginning informed the distribution practices of “social newsreel,” which targeted audiences both within the Russian Empire (Kharkov, Kiev, Baku, and Riga, along with Russian cities like Irkutsk, Rostov and Samara) and beyond.\(^{157}\) Prints of the first seven issues of *Svobodnaia Rossiia*, along with one print of *Funerals for the Victims of the Revolution* and (on Lenin’s orders) five prints of the anti-tsarist *Tsar Nicholas II, Autocrat of All of Russia* and 10 of the film *October Revolution*, were sent by the Skobelev Committee to the United States in 1917-18; various

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\(^{156}\) Just one example of how considerations of the “mass” character of cinematic reception inflected early Soviet thought on film: In some telling comments from 1925, Pudovkin insisted that cinema “by its very nature” is “organically linked” to the mass of spectators, for the simple reason that the film exists only by virtue of “the intense associative work of the spectator . . . [who] completes the creative process begun by the director.” If films are to have a proletarian *class* character, however, they must be created by - that is, directed by – individuals organically tied to the proletariat (“Proletarskij kinematograf,” *Kino-Gazeta* 6 (1925): 2). To be sure, films, like other texts, do *project* intended audiences; but their actual circulation can never be deduced from that projected public. See Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, esp. 69-77 and 114-116; Jacques Rancière and Davide Panagia, “Dissenting Words: A Conversation with Jacques Rancière,” *Diacritics* 30.2 (Summer 2000): 113-126, esp. 113-116; and my *Inscription and Modernity*, 3-34.

\(^{157}\) RGALI f. 2057, op. 1, d. 261, ll. 108-109.
Scandinavian cinema firms purchased and exhibited Skobelev productions as well.\textsuperscript{158}

Thus the films were viewed, in specific and undocumented acts of reception, by audiences well outside the bounds of any specifically Russian \textit{demokratiia}, as well as in the Russian heartland (\textit{Svobodnaia Rossiia} was exceptionally popular in Petrograd).\textsuperscript{159}

We will see later that “Soviet” film, too, could never be (and never was) “of and for the Soviets,” but was multiply addressed, invariably and constitutively.\textsuperscript{160}

Finally, the filmmakers, whether in 1917 or later, do not on the whole belong in any unproblematic \textit{class} sense to “the democracy” themselves – except as (to use Marx’s and Engels’s self-description in the \textit{Manifesto}) “bourgeois ideologists who have worked out a theoretical understanding of the whole historical development” – and certainly not as the “working class,” “army” and “peasantry” given in Boltianskii’s definition. Red

\textsuperscript{158} RGALI f. 2057, op. 1, d. 261, l. 47, 104; d. 256, l. 6. I have not found more specific information about any U.S. or Scandinavian screenings.

\textsuperscript{159} Between 50 and 180 copies of each \textit{Svobodnaia Rossiia} installment were sold or distributed in the capital city (RGALI f. 2057, op. 1, d. 261, l. 104).

\textsuperscript{160} Such considerations link the problematic I am discussing to that of “the public sphere” that has generated so much interesting work in recent years. The difference, at least as regards the Russian revolutionary situation, can be illustrated by reference to Miriam Hansen’s summary of the Negt-Kluge notion of a “proletarian public sphere”: “[L]abor power contains and reproduces capacities and energies that exceed its realization in/as a commodity - resistance to separation, \textit{Eigensinn} (stubbornness, self-will), self-regulation, fantasy, memory, curiosity, cooperation, feelings and skills in excess of capitalist valorization. Whether these energies can become effective depends on the organization of the public sphere: the extent to which experience is dis/organized from 'above' – by the exclusionary standards of high culture or in the interest of profit - or from 'below', by the experiencing subjects themselves, on the basis of their context of living” (Miriam Hansen, “Early cinema, late cinema: Permutations of the public sphere,” \textit{Screen} 34:3 (Autumn 1993): 194-210; here 204-205). The tension of class and mass, however – particularly in its “class” aspect, as it relates to political action – centrally involves making that “context of living” the object of radical, continual, and organized (even programmatic) contestation. It involves, in other words, maintaining social revolution as a continual horizon of possibility; and the disappearance of this horizon is surely part of what makes theories of “public sphere” appear more pertinent to current conditions.
Army service, as we have indicated, would serve to render the democratic-proletarian pedigrees of some intellectual workers more “organic”; yet their relationship to demokratiia would remain oblique. To note this fact is in no way to argue for the illegitimacy of the political-cultural work of socialist intellectuals: as Balibar has written, “no ‘working-class party’ has ever existed except as the relative and conflictual fusion of a portion of the working class with a determinate group of intellectuals.”

It may not be obvious what all this has to do with Vertov, or rather, with his films. I will argue throughout this book, sometimes only implicitly, that the problematic outlined here is profoundly embedded in Vertov’s cinematic practice, as a kind of ideological matrix affecting their formal structure and their modes of addressing audiences, but can offer no more than a few anticipations of those arguments here. On the most general level, surely the fundamental and insoluble Vertovian antimony of “staged” versus “non-acted film” – that is, the sometimes embarrassing contradiction between his fierce rejection of staging and his apparent practice of it – can be recoded in terms of the tension between self-conscious class-based action and more multiply layered, less representable activities of the “mass.” The films seem caught, in this regard, in an overlapping drift between a vision of social life and its protagonists as defined in some knowable way by class, alongside other social categories – with agents who do certain things and don’t do others: an anxious epistemological concern that blurs into paranoia during the duplicity-obsessed late 1930s – and another that conceives of that life as something economically unified, like a “city symphony,” but which (as Vertov remarked

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in some important notes for *Man with a Movie Camera* from 20 March 1927) “goes its own way,” “never stops,” and does not “obey [the camera].”\(^{162}\)

But the oscillation between class and mass has more local effects as well. Sometimes it is transmuted into spatial terms, as when, in *One Sixth of the World* (1926), a caricatured foreign bourgeoisie, set brusquely apart from the Soviet world in the first part of the film, turns out eventually to be participating in the “building of socialism” anyway through its consumption of Soviet products. The Soviet economy, supposedly characterized by different class relations than its Western counterpart, thereby emerges, perhaps inadvertently, as part of some larger economy incorporating both socialist and capitalist “systems.”

More complex examples involve shifts in ideological focus from specific class to larger multitude, sometimes within in a single sequence. In one crucial section in the second part of *One Sixth of the World* that directly addresses various members of the Soviet polity (as “you”), images of the industrial proletariat in factory workplaces (“you, who overturned the power of capital in October”) are given momentary visual privilege, in part through a spectacular use of superimposition differentiating them from other addressees. They are then engulfed, however, in a long Whitman-inspired syntagmatic chain that places the “proletarians” on one level with a woman “washing clothes with [her] feet,” a baby “sucking [its] mother’s breast,” a boy “playing with a trapped Arctic fox,” and even the audience “sitting in this movie theater,” all represented as mutual “owners of the Soviet land” both on the basis of their engagement in these unremarkable

\(^{162}\) RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 236, l. 360b.
actions, and by virtue of being addressed by the film. A thematic of production and construction in Vertov’s films – and especially in Man with a Movie Camera and Enthusiasm – leads on the one hand to a “class” iconography of specific proletarian motifs (“socialist construction”), and on the other to an autoreferential stress upon process, contingency, and identity as a product of representation, in accord with the volatilizing “mass” dynamics of capital as conceptualized by Marxism.

Indeed, it is worth underscoring again how the class-mass tension, or “aborted dialectics” to use Balibar’s phrase, can be said to emerge from Marxism’s representation of capitalism itself. Capitalism at once dissolves (earlier social formations), creates (new formations), unifies (everyone into a single market economy, with the sale of labor power structurally at the center) and separates (people into different classes, depending on their fluctuating place within the relations of production). Each of these tendencies

163 A “Soviet” ideological closure caps the sequence, to be sure, but mechanically, and almost as an afterthought; see the discussion in Chapter Six.

164 Masses, Classes, Ideas, xviii. It is crucial that the class-mass opposition not be reduced to any variant of what is arguably today’s dominant and most intellectually debilitating ideological binary, that of the “open” versus the “closed,” with its obvious and reified ethical valences. Rather, the opposition pertains to the need to coordinate, as part of social analysis, multiple spatial, temporal and structural levels of focus with complex causal explanation. Balibar clarifies, crucially, that “far from concluding from these ‘aporetic’ inquiries that Marxist theory was, after all, collapsing due to its internal contradictions, [he suspects] that the difficulties in Marx are closely connected with problems that remain open in the present – particularly with problems which concern the new forms and functions of racism in the ‘world-economy,’ ‘world politics,’ and ‘world communications’ of the late twentieth century” (ibid.). I would concur, and hope to demonstrate some of the ongoing salience of this problematic in later chapters and particularly in the conclusion. Certainly, the “class-mass” problematic has the double advantage of 1) being able to link considerations of economics, culture and identity, and 2) being applicable to both “Communist” and “capitalist” social formations, without reducing them to related-but-alternative forms of “modernity.”
generates consequences with multiple valences: the creation of new possibilities and deracination, immiseration; interconnectedness and imperialism; new kinds of solidarity and new kinds of antagonism.\(^{165}\) Most importantly, capitalism is also historically finite – it did not and will not always exist – but the causes of its finitude are to be found within capitalism’s own dynamic, not exterior to it (if only because capitalism admits of no exterior: an important consideration in the far from classically capitalist space of the Russian Empire in 1917).\(^{166}\) The vacillation between “class” and “mass,” which will shape Vertov’s modes of addressing spectators and of structuring his films, is a consequence of taking economic production under capitalism to be the dominant underlying the very constitution of societies worldwide and in all its complexity. It stems from the certainty that every person stands in some knowable and consequential relation, including some subjective relation, to that productive center; and from an equally strong conviction that those relations are, like capitalism itself, mutable and finite.\(^{167}\) How else

\(^{165}\) For a famous account of the importance of “the traffic in commodities and news” to the emergence of society or the “public sphere” in the 18th century, and of Marx’s discovery of the non-equivalence, based in unequal property relations, between the classical bourgeois participant in civil society and the “abstract human being,” see Jürgen Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: A Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 14-26 and 117-129; here 15 and 125.

\(^{166}\) An important and relevant critique of the very notion of “classically capitalist space,” developed through an elaboration of Trotsky’s notion of “combined and uneven development,” is to be found in Justin Rosenberg, “Why is there no International Historical Sociology?”, European Journal of International Relations 12:3 (2006): 307-340.

\(^{167}\) Belief in capitalism’s global hegemony, or status as absolute political-economic horizon for the present, was an article of faith for Russian social-democrats, as popular manuals on Communist thought perhaps reveal best: see, for instance, the accounts of capitalism given in the various editions of Platon Kerzhentsev’s Biblioteka kommunista (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel’stvo, 1919), 7 (in the fourth edition). For a far more
would Communism be possible, were they not mutable and finite? But how could Communism be realized, except through a struggle among the classes generated by capitalism?168

In any event (and to return at last to our narrative), it was precisely in the way that specific members of the Skobelev Committee conceptualized their relationship to demokratiia and its others that the Committee’s politics, and the political differences that apparently raged within it, were made manifest. Boltianskii, for instance, created a stir with a script he wrote entitled Born out of Chaos (Iz khaosa rozhdennago, 1917), whose production several members of the Moscow branch of the Committee, in particular the great animator Vladislav Starewycz, opposed, because that they deemed it liable to foment “class hatred” through its highly negative representation of the intelligentsia.169 A letter of April 1917 from one of the Skobelev Committee’s members – probably Boltianskii – to the Executive Committee of the Petrograd Soviet of Worker’s and Soldier’s Deputies indicates a desire to serve, “as an old SD Party worker,” “the cause of the democracy by popularizing the slogans of the democracy, [and making known] the nature of its organization and its activities” by means of a “division of political
detailed theoretical elaboration of these ideas, see Balibar, Masses, Classes, Ideas, esp. 142-149, 162-174. On the level of representation, the problem also relates to the paradoxical bond linking “symbolic” and “allegorical” thought as discussed in Paul de Man, “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” in Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism, 2nd ed., intro. Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 187-228; and below.

168 I should note in passing that the tension I have outlined here has nothing directly to do with any claims as to Communism’s historical “inevitability”: it is compatible, as a problematic, with a variety of points of view as to the temporality of Communism’s emergence or non-emergence.

169 RGALI f. 2057, op. 1, d. 256, l. 7. The film was never made, and I have been unable to find a copy of the script.
propaganda” – in other words, through the Social Newsreel division that the Skobelev Committee had just established. Among the ideas this member promised to pitch to the Committee were included an “imposing” film “about our proletarian May 1st,” profits from which would go in part to the Soviet, and a propaganda film that would defend the introduction of an eight-hour workday by contrasting counter-arguments from the bourgeois press (i.e., a workday of that duration would undermine industry; or (by contrast) that it would lead to intensified work during that span and therefore to rapid disablement of workers) with images of “work being carried out at full speed” under an eight-hour regime: “among the people, vivid, lively photography will dispel the slanders of the bourgeois press better than anything else.”

Although Russia’s complex and fluctuating leadership in 1917 was represented quite even-handedly in the 13 Svobodnaia Rossiia newsreels (which ran from April to 2 October 1917) – Socialist Revolutionary leader Chernov, Menshevik leader Tsereteli, Prime Minister Kerensky, Constitutional Democrat (abbreviated “Kadet”) Miliukov, and (late in the series) Bolsheviks Trotsky, Lunacharsky, Kamenev and Kollontai all made appearances, among many others – the Skobelev Committee also made more strictly “democratic” films that presage later Soviet non-fiction genres and themes. One such film, In the Petrograd Proletariat’s Children’s Colony (V kolonij detej Petrogradskogo proletariata, 1917) depicted the activities at a large (nearly 1000-strong) proto-Pioneer

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170 RGALI f. 2057, op. 1, d. 261, ll. 41-41ob. Three filmic tributes to May 1st, shot in Petrograd, Kronstadt and on the front, were made by the Committee (RGALI f. 2057, op. 1, d. 261, ll. 7-7ob); I have found no evidence that any film endorsing the eight-hour day was produced.

171 RGALI f. 2057, op. 1, d. 261, ll. 10-16, 69, 71-72. I will discuss the Svobodnaia Rossiia newsreels in more detail in Chapter Four.
camp in Siverskaia Station near Petrograd, including food preparation, medical care, reading, girls sewing, swimming and games, and children taking a leadership role as medical orderlies and supervisors.\(^{172}\) A distillation of the film was incorporated in the 10\(^{th}\) installment of Svobodnaia Rossiia, wedged between images of Kerensky, Ekaterina Breshko-Breshkovskaia (the “Grandmother of the Russian Revolution,” one of the founders of the SR Party), pro-war sailor (and later White \textit{and} Red agent) Fyodor Batkin, and the First All-Russian Congress of Worker’s Cooperation on the one side, and of a priest blessing a battalion on the Riga Front on the other.\(^{173}\) Such diversity in a single newsreel seems to reflect the Skobelev Committee’s efforts to incorporate multiple political viewpoints in its productions, if not indeed the varied positions of the Committee’s own membership.\(^{174}\)

\(^{172}\) RGALI f. 2057, op. 1, d. 261, l. 58. This short film presages important “children’s camp” sequences in both \textit{Kino-Eye} and Vertov’s early \textit{The Red Star Literary-Instructional Agit-Steamer of the All-Russia Central Executive Committee} (1919), both discussed in Chapter Five.

\(^{173}\) RGALI f. 2057, op. 1, d. 261, l. 13. This is one of the few Svobodnaia Rossiias that have (in part) survived (RGAKFD 12655), though without the image of Kerensky. The youngsters were evidently sons and daughters of tobacco factory workers.

\(^{174}\) In October, after being initially forbidden by the Petrograd Military-Revolutionary Committee from filming (30 October (OS)), Boltianskii and two cameramen were allowed to shoot footage of the revolutionary events. As Listov has written, the Skobelev film \textit{Oktiabr’skii Perevorot (October Turning Point)} (1917), made under Boltianskii’s direction, refuses all evaluation of the event: using “cautious, neutral” intertitles, it gives equal weight to the funerals of Red Army soldiers and those of officers of the Provisional Government’s forces – a neutrality adopted, no doubt, because of uncertainty as to what the future would hold (Rossiia, Revoliutsiia, Kinematograf, 31). Simply listing the items in \textit{Svobodnaia Rossiia} 5 (7 July 1917) reveals this diversity of perspective: a portrait of Left SR leader Maria Spiridonova; a group portrait of some peasant deputies, possibly SRs as well; activists (party unidentified) working on the eve of elections to the Petrograd city duma; a demonstration in Petrograd of Ukrainians in support of Ukrainian independence; and another demonstration in favor of drafting those who had previously refused to serve and sending them to the front.
Within the socially polarized Russia of 1917, however, this relatively liberal approach to political representation was hardly a guarantee of the films’ success, or even acceptability; and the Skobelev Committee encountered serious problems in distributing and exhibiting its most political productions. Although some Committee members suspected in mid-1917 that distributors and theater owners were proving reluctant to show their films, the real difficulties did not emerge until the beginning of 1918 and the heightening of the tensions that preceded the opening and dispersal of the Constituent Assembly on 5-6 January (OS). Although Boltianskii claimed at the time that Toward the Opening of the Constituent Assembly had been shown successfully in Petrograd, his Moscow Skobelev colleagues were more skeptical about its chances in that city, and not without reason. At the Forum – one of five Moscow theaters that had, with trepidation, accepted the Constituent Assembly film – the first screening was broken off by wild commotion among spectators, culminating in fistfights and chairs being hurled through the air. At another theater, Casino-Roma, the large advertising poster describing the contents of the film was torn down by order of the Moscow Soviet of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies; four Red Guards were then dispatched to stand in front of the theater, which was prohibited from exhibiting the film. Needless to say, the other three theaters cancelled their screenings, and Moscow Committee members were furious that Boltianskii’s “worker’s section” had produced a film that proved unmarketable even (or especially) to the workers’ Soviets and their sympathizers.175

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175 RGALI f. 2057, op. 1, d. 256, ll. 1, 1ob, 10. The information about the abortive Moscow screenings comes from a letter of 15 January 1918 from Konstantin Markovich Brenner of the Moscow Skobelev Commitee to V.I. Dement’ev. See also Magidov, Zrinaia Pamiat’ Istorii, 63.
Today we know, through the work of historian Alexander Rabinowitch, that the demonstration depicted in Toward the Opening of the Constituent Assembly was anything but a manifestation of social and political harmony. Led primarily by socialists of moderate ideological cast but opposed to exclusive rule by the Soviets - including SRs, representatives of the now-persecuted executive committees of the workers’, soldiers’ and peasants’ Soviets, and Menshevik-Defensists, though few workers or soldiers – the demonstration, involving anywhere from 10,000 to 100,000 people, instead “revealed the immense rift that divided the population of Petrograd after six weeks of Soviet power”:

As the marchers turned north on Liteinyi Prospekt, they were greeted by a huge banner displayed above the street: “Make Way for the Electors chosen by the People!” Arriving at the Taurida Palace and finding the gates in the wrought iron fence surrounding it locked and heavily guarded, they clambered over it and stormed into the palace gardens. There they listened to fiery speeches calling for an immediate end to Soviet rule . . . Pushing past [Bolshevik leader and later Petrograd Cheka head Moisej] Uritskii, the crowd forged into the palace . . . There, at 4:00 PM, a meeting was convened of some 60 of the estimated 127 Constituent Assembly delegates then in Petrograd . . . On 29 November, they managed to reassemble in the Taurida Palace. However, their meeting was forcibly dispersed, and, from then on, they were barred from reentering the palace.176

Members of the Kadet (Liberal) party – some of whose leaders were indeed implicated in “the counterrevolution on the Don led by Generals Kornilov, Alekseev, and Kaledin” – also joined in the demonstration, and Lenin and the Bolsheviks took their participation as sufficient reason to construe the march as an “armed uprising against Soviet rule” and to outlaw the Kadet party. Meanwhile, critics of the Bolsheviks, including Commissar of

176 Rabinowitch, The Bolsheviks in Power, 75-76. Indeed, the film Toward the Opening of the Constituent Assembly (RGAKFD 11502) clearly advocates (with the crowd it depicts) endorsing those elected already to the city Duma, and mentions that troops were trying to keep them out of the palace (guns and bombs are shown). The crowd shown in the film is mainly made up of "townspeople," but representatives from the provinces and even one from the army are shown and named as well.
Justice Isaac Shteinberg (an SR), denounced their action as both motivated by unjustified paranoia about the Kadets’ influence and as bound to reinforce suspicions that the Soviet regime, directed by the Bolsheviks, was attempting to undermine the Constituent Assembly even before it met.177

What ensued – to grossly simplify an impossibly complex story – was an increasing monopolization of power in the hands of the Bolsheviks, who proved incapable, because of a combination of ideological principle and seasoned mistrust, of working with either the “right-leaning” socialists (the Right SRs and Mensheviks, who believed that the Constituent Assembly needed to include bourgeois parties like the Kadets, given that the Revolution’s “bourgeois phase” had not yet terminated) or those closer to a “centrist-socialist” position, like the Left SRs and moderate Bolsheviks, who advocated a multi-party socialist Assembly, in line with the wishes of nearly all workers and soldiers, at least in Petrograd. In retrospect, the situation, unfolding against a background of simmering counterrevolution, foreign hostility, economic collapse, and the relative indifference of most of the population outside the major cities, had the locked-in, entropic quality of tragedy: proletarians desiring a strictly socialist government with multiple parties; Right SRs and their allies refusing a socialist-only government on the basis of what they believed to be strict theoretical principle; the Bolsheviks breaking the deadlock through a unilateral seizure of power “in the name of the Soviets” and

177 Ibid., 76-77. Shteinberg was also (incidentally) the father of the famous art historian Leo Steinberg (1920-2011).
dissolution of the Constituent Assembly on 5 January, thereby sideling both the long-hoped-for Assembly and the aspirations of the workers in whose name they acted.\footnote{See Ronald Grigor Suny, “Toward a Social History of the October Revolution,” American Historical Review 88:1 (February 1983): 31-52; Suny, The Soviet Experiment, 58-60; Rabinowitch, The Bolsheviks in Power, 78-127; Steve Smith, “Year One in Petrograd” [review of The Bolsheviks in Power], New Left Review [new series] 52 (July-August 2008): 151-160. It is worth noting that Skobelev Committee films made in 1917 post-October described the destruction in Moscow and Petrograd, and the funerals of victims of the violence, already as consequences of "civil war" (e.g., Oktiabr'skij perevorot [RGAFD 12530]).}

As regards the Skobelev Committee’s productions, or at least those like the Constituent Assembly film, we must conclude that they projected a collective addressee – a complex demokratiia, engaged by and in politics – that did not conform to the radically fragmented polity that was then emerging. (A year later Vertov, now employed by the Moscow Film Committee and reworking some of the same Skobelev Committee footage for his Anniversary of the Revolution (1918), was able to frame (through intertitles) all those images of mass meetings and marching as straightforward representations of “the people” (narod) united in opposition to the Old Regime and Provisional Government.)

“Social” newsreel that addressed an entire society was impossible, under conditions of incipient civil war; and the list of intertitles for the Committee’s Opening and Dissolution of the Constituent Assembly (1918) points to this emergent reality with woeful clarity:

1. 5 January 1918
   OPENING AND DISSOLUTION OF THE CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY.
2. In the Taurida Palace.
3. General view of the Taurida Palace from the sidelines.
4. The meeting hall in the Taurida Palace prepared for the opening of the Constituent Assembly.
5. Uritskii, Commissar of the Constituent Assembly.
6. Taurida Palace Commandant Prigovorskij and Commissar Uritskii.
7. Guarding the Taurida Palace on 5 January.
9. Three-inch field guns in the palace square.
10. Machine gun inside the building (in the room occupied by the Left SRs).
11. A crowd [publika] that broke through the fence surrounding the Taurida Palace.
12. SVERDLOV. Chairman of the Central Executive Committee of the Workers’, Soldiers’ and Peasants’ Deputies, opens the Constituent Assembly.
13. CHERNOV. Elected chairman of the Constituent Assembly.
14. The meeting hall at the opening of the Constituent Assembly, during Sverdlov’s speech.
15. During Chernov’s speech.
16. After Sverdlov’s speech, all deputies rise to sing the “International.”
17. The Bolshevik deputies to the Constituent Assembly.
18. The Left SRs.
27. FORWARD.179
28. Shooting at demonstrators and panic.180

The Skobelev Committee continued to make films about political news of the day – including a short about the “nightmarish murder” of the Kadets Fyodor Kokoshkin and Aleksandr Shingarev in their hospital beds by drunken sailors and Red Guards on 7 January, another about negotiations on the front (in which a young Mikhail Kol’tsov appeared), and a new version of Toward the Government of the People, which was

179 Items 19 through 26 are missing from the montage list.

180 RGALI f. 2057, op. 1, d. 261, l. 80-80ob; see also RGALI f. 2057, op. 1, d. 256, l. 1ob. An incomplete Skobelev film bearing the same title (Otkrytie i likvidatsiia Uchreditel’nogo Sobraniia [RGAKFD 12521]) bears some resemblance to the description of the event offered in these intertitles; it is unclear whether it was part of that other film, an entirely separate film, or perhaps the only film actually made under this name. The film stresses the mass, broadly public character of the pro-Constituent Assembly demonstrations of 5 January, the diverse make-up of the crowd (soldiers, officers, townspeople are all seen), and that soldiers and artillery were summoned - by whom it is not said - to remove the demonstrators from the Taurida palace square. Though no political actors or parties are named, the film is clearly on the side of the crowds, some members of which died (to quote an intertitle) as "fighters for popular government." Listov suggests that the Skobelev Committee began to make “anti-Bolshevik” films at this time; if so, this Opening and Dissolution film may well have been banned (Rossiia, Revoliutsiia, Kinematograf, 84). For an account of that historic day, see Rabinowitch, The Bolsheviks in Power, 104-127.
banned in August 1918\textsuperscript{181} - but there was little left for it, in the changed circumstances, but to be nationalized and absorbed into the new system of commissariats, a process completed by the time Vertov arrived to work in the Moscow Film Committee in May 1918.\textsuperscript{182}

To speak of nationalizing an institution like the film division of the Skobelev Committee, already the recipient of state subsidies from the Tsarist and the Provisional Governments, seems peculiar, but in fact accords entirely with the convoluted history of cinema’s nationalization after October 1917, one of the crucial phases in the development of “Soviet” cinema, whose full retelling would take us well beyond the bounds of the present study.\textsuperscript{183} The actual order from Narkompros to nationalize the Skobelev Committee’s property – the first significant cinema-nationalization act of the new regime – did not come until 19 March 1918, but was preceded by a series of confusing signals, starting on 22 November 1917 (OS) with Lunacharsky’s affirmation of the Committee’s autonomy, and a declaration on the 23\textsuperscript{rd} that the soon to be defunct War Ministry’s cultural-education division (including the Skobelev Committee) would be transferred to Narkompros.\textsuperscript{184}

\textsuperscript{181} RGALI f. 2057, op. 1, d. 261, l. 33ob; Listov and Khokhlova, eds., Istoriiia otechestvennaia kino, 91-93; Rabinowitch, The Bolsheviks in Power, 118.

\textsuperscript{182} Letopis’, 244-245; 250; Taylor, Politics of the Soviet Cinema, 46.

\textsuperscript{183} For more on the early nationalization – which was anything but a unified, gracefully managed event – see Taylor, Politics of the Soviet Cinema, 43-51; Vance Kepley, Jr., “Soviet Cinema and State Control: Lenin’s Nationalization Decree Reconsidered,” Journal of Film and Video 42.2 (Summer 1990): 3-14; and Listov, Rossiia, Revoliutsiia, Kinematograf, 45-76.

\textsuperscript{184} Letopis’, 230. For the nationalization decree, signed by Lenin, see RGALI f. 2057, op. 1, d. 258, l. 3; for Lunacharsky’s affirmation of November, RGALI f. 2057, op. 1, d. 258,
This was a time, as Viktor Listov has noted, when decrees were pronounced experimentally, virtually as a kind of agitation designed to get things moving rather than as carefully crafted legislation, and not only by the Bolsheviks.\textsuperscript{185} The most important event immediately preceding the Committee’s absorption into Narkompros was the strange decree promulgated on 12 February 1918 by the newly formed “Legislative Soviet” of the Union of Workers in Artistic Cinema (or SRKhK: \textit{Soiuz rabotnikov khudozhestvennoj kinematografii}), without sanction by either the central government or the Union’s membership, demanding that “all film factories, studios, distribution outlets, theaters and repositories” be placed under the control of the Union.\textsuperscript{186} The decree generated uproar, not least among members of the Union, and evidently led to defensive reactions (stashing away film and other resources; plans to pull up stakes and move south or abroad) on the part of already panicked producers, film artists and theater owners. The motives for the decree remain unclear, although it may have been intended as a provocation to Narkompros’s Cinema Subsection (headed by Lenin’s wife, Nadezhda Krupskaia, from January 1918) to take control of a rapidly deteriorating situation, on the levels of production, distribution and exhibition, due to the incipient flight of much of the

\textsuperscript{1} Some closed but apparently inconsequential discussion about cinema nationalization did occur within Narkompros in December 1917 (\textit{Letopis'}, 233). Famously, Lunacharsky would affirm the regime’s opposition to full nationalization of cinema in an interview of April 1918; see Listov, Rossiia, Revoliutsiia, \textit{Kinematograf}, 50. To be sure, some prominent Bolshevik ideologues did press publicly for nationalization early on: see V. [Platon] Kerzhentsev, \textit{Revoliutsiia i teatr} (Moscow: Dennitsa, 1918), 37.

\textsuperscript{185} Rossiia, Revoliutsiia, \textit{Kinematograf}, 60.

\textsuperscript{186} Ibid., 47-48. The main figure in the five-person soviet was actor and director Vladimir Gardin, with whom Vertov would soon be working on \textit{Kino-Nedelia}. 

At any rate, it seems that Listov is mistaken to claim that the “Legislative Soviet” acted on behalf of less commercially viable film enterprises like the Skobelev Committee, which depended heavily on state funding and therefore may have sought to level the playing field through nationalization. Archival documents make it clear that the members of the Skobelev Committee, at least in Petrograd and probably in Moscow, in fact opposed even their own absorption into Narkompros and protested it, even while preparing inventories of their equipment, films and other property for the inevitable transfer. The protest of 27 March, formulated with the aid of legal counsel, complained that the nationalization was simply declared without argued justification; that it left the fates of the Committee’s employees entirely uncertain; that it potentially compromised the future of the Petrograd Skobelev Committee’s newly founded Studio of Screen Art, headed by Aleksandr Voznesenskij and already instructing more than 150 students; that the continuation of its new Scientific Division was likewise put in question; that it placed in jeopardy all sorts of commercial/contractual relationships with buyers and institutions at home and abroad; and that the Committee could not be nationalized in any case, given that it had been under government auspices (the War Ministry) to begin with.188

187 Letopis’, 237-241; Taylor, Politics of the Soviet Cinema, 43-46. That the various “instances” were acting independently was clear from the confusing variety of different nationalizing or “municipalizing” initiatives. In January 1918, for instance, the Petrograd Soviet affirmed the right of their counterpart in nearby Petropavlovsk to confiscate theaters (in response to complaints from one Nazarov, whose theater had already been confiscated by the Petropavlovsk Soviet) (Letopis’, 236).

188 Rossiia, Revoliutsia, Kinematograf, 48-49, 56-58; RGALI f. 2057, op. 1, f. 257, ll. 11-12ob; f. 258, ll. 14-16. I have found no evidence in Skobelev Committee documents
Indeed, how is the nationalization of a state institution to be carried out? Even this nationalization evidently occurred in a context of uncertainty and perhaps disagreement on the highest levels. Lunacharsky, for instance, gave an order 11 days after Lenin’s decree (30 March 1918) to “suspend the transfer” of the Committee’s inventory prior to getting clarification (from Lenin himself, presumably) about the import of the decree.\footnote{RGALI f. 2057, op. 1, d. 258, l. 4. For an account of Lunacharsky’s resistance to nationalizing all movie theaters under Narkompros in 1918 (advocating instead that they operate under the jurisdiction of local soviets), see Iu. N. Flakserman, \textit{V ogne zhizni i bor’by: vospominaniiia starogo kommunista} (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo politicheskoj literatury, 1987), 140-141.} The main question for the Committee’s members concerned not its status as a “state” institution, but rather its autonomy within the array of other cultural divisions, commissariats, committees and so on forming at the time. (As we will see in later chapters, the issue of institutional autonomy would persist for Dziga Vertov, as he attempted to carve out a distinct place for his “kinocs,” for the affiliations he began to establish with the incipient Young Pioneers organization, and his dream of a “creative laboratory,” within the changing framework of the Soviet film industry and cultural organizations.) As it turns out, non-fiction/newsreel filmmaking would continue, involving many of the same people who had been working on it before, but now as part of a specifically Soviet and centralized cultural administration (Narkompros, until the end that any of its members advocated the nationalization of private cinema concerns. The Committee’s staff had already expressed much concern regarding their salaries, and sought guarantees of employment in the future (RGALI f. 2057, op. 1, f. 257, ll. 33-37; dated 3 March 1918); evidently, some attempt was made to separate the Committee’s “philanthropic” and “educational” sections, and to pass only the former to Narkompros (RGALI f. 2057, op. 1, f. 258, l. 10). The Studio of Screen Art would later continue under Narkompros auspices as the first Soviet film school.
of 1922): that is, within a state apparatus, still very much in formation, that claimed to
govern the whole Russian Republic, though now in the name of the Soviets. But what
would the “Soviet” newsreel look like?