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Khronika: Soviet Newsreel at the Dawn of the Information Age

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**Khronika:
Soviet newsreel at the dawn of the Information Age.**

A dissertation presented

by

Maxim Pozdorovkin

to

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Khronika: Soviet newsreel at the dawn of the Information Age.

Abstract

This dissertation considers ten years in the life of one word. Between 1918 and 1928, *khronika*—the Russian word that describes newsreel filmmaking—became the site of extensive debates about the aesthetics and social responsibilities of the documentary film. Following the February revolution of 1917, *khronika* was promoted as the privileged record keeper of a new historical era, catalyzing a period of unprecedented formal innovation. During this period, Soviet documentarians transform the relationship between text and image, developing a film style that integrated verbal and visual material. In newsreel journal such as *Kino-Pravda*, images cease to be passive illustrations accompanying text and are for the first time treated as equally capable of delivering propositional content. Like other modernist art practices, *khronika* develops in dialogue with attempts to define its essence as a film genre and its medium specificity. Falling under the influence of competing strains within Constructivism, *khronika* is first conceived as a purely visual medium and then again as a purely factual one.

Made up of seventeen variations on the social, political, and aesthetic aspects of *khronika*'s evolution, the dissertation makes a crucial revision of documentary history. Rather than focus on the first instances of non-fiction films that adapt the narrative conventions of fiction film, *Khronika* examines the origins of documentary as an informational medium. Drawing on film theory, history of science, and philosophy, *Khronika* asks what it was that film learned to express during the first tumultuous decade

when documentaries ceased to be windows onto a world and become the active interpreters of the reality captured by motion picture cameras.

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[Title arranged from Karel Teige's 1926 *Alphabet*]

i. A decade in the life of one word.

In Russian, the word *khronika* is a noble and sober one. A cognate of the Greek *Χρόνος*, the word first appears in the eleventh century when it is used to describe historical chronicles and other annalistic writing. For the next eight hundred years, until the early 20th century, the word *khronika* can be adequately translated, depending on the context, as chronicles, annals, or records. Something changes, however, with the emergence and proliferation of photographic media; *khronika* becomes synonymous with with motion pictures and is understood to contain historical and informational content. This dissertation provides a conceptual history of *khronika* between 1918 and 1928—a decade during which the word's meaning is tested and widely debated. During the decade under review, *khronika* balloons in scope and encompasses most non-fiction film, including some of the earliest feature-length documentaries. Around 1928, the word's meaning contracts somewhat and eventually stabilizes as a form of visual information. Defined factually, *khronika* becomes synonympous with the *Sovkino-Journal*, the newsreel journal shown before feature films in all movie theaters across the Soviet Union.

Immediately prior to the invention of motion pictures, *khronika* was used to describe the brief verbal dispatches that appeared in newspapers and trade publications alongside more in-depth articles. For example, a foreign *khronika* column in the 1894 year-end edition of *The Photographic Herald* (Фотографический Вестник) informed readers that the photographer A. Mazurin was awarded a silver medal in Hamburg.¹ No

¹ Stigneev, Valery *Век Фотографии. 1894-1994: Очерки истории отечественной фотографии*. (Moscow: Knizhniy Dom, 2011), 10.

illustration was provided. This would not be the case for long. Within just a few years, *khronika* would be visually enhanced.

At the end of the 19th century, photography was rapidly spreading across the Russian empire. Photo societies sprung up in the major cities—Moscow, Petersburg, Warsaw—as well as in regional centers such as Saratov, Kharkov, Khaborovsk, Simferopol.² Trade journals with reports on the latest technological advances appeared regularly; photo exhibitions and contests became staples of life in urban centers. The initial exhibitions, typically showing the work of local *photo-societies*, followed the fine art mold and emphasized portraiture, landscapes, and monuments. This was known as *fine art photography* (художественная фотография/светопись). Both the *fine art* photographer and the connoisseur looked at the picture, not through it, and discussed the photograph much as one would discuss an oil painting. On occasion, this affiliation with the fine art lineage caused photographers to espouse a curiously anti-technological bias. The landscape photographer N. Petrov went so far as to argue against the clear benefits of new lenses, which limited wide-angle distortion and improved focus, and insisted that “perfect focus, with its matter-of-fact dryness and excessive details, harms the artistic impression of a work.”³

Though *khronika* had referred to annalistic text for several hundred years, by the end of the 19th century the word became synonymous with the documentary photography printed in newspapers and periodicals. *Khronika* differed from fine art photography both in its purpose and its aesthetics. Sharpness, clarity, easy recognition—these were *khronika*'s prized attributes. *Khronika* emerged as a new mode of documenting real-world

² Stigneev, *Век Фотографии*, 11.

³ Stigneev, *Век Фотографии*, 24.

events with the regular publication of Petr Ozup's and Karl Bulla's photos of the Russo-Japanese war for the journal *Annals of the 1904-1905 war* ("Летопись войны 1904-1905 гг").⁴ In Ozup's and Balla's *Annals*, *photo-khronika* was used for two main representational purposes. Consider the two images below.



The first is a record of a specific event: Tsar Nicholas II's inspection of a new battleship. The second, as the caption makes clear, offers evidence of the strategic importance of the Suez Canal and of the setback suffered by the Russian fleet following Britain's refusal to grant access to the canal.

The fact that the photographs could be used to signify in these two somewhat different ways was recognized early. *Photo-khronika* described all photojournalism until the mid-1920s when it was supplemented by *photo-reportage* (фото-репортаж), a term that emphasized the representation of individual events. One of the first major Soviet photo exhibits, held in Leningrad in 1924 and showing more than three thousand works, was divided into three sections, *aristic* (художественная), *scientific* (научно-техническая), and, largest of all, *photo-reportage and social khronika*. The sub-division

⁴ Koloskova, Elena and Elena Lebedeva "Петр Озуп. Творческое наследие." Published at <http://ftad.ru/library/otzup.shtml>. Accessed 08/21/2012.

of the last section into two groups highlights the differences in the ways that a photograph was understood to relate to its real world referent. The *photo-reportage* captured a specific event. *Photo-khronika* was less temporally fixed to a specific event and referred to the photograph's ability to elaborate and illustrate an abstract concept, such as the “society” implicit in *social khronika*.

With respect to still photographs, the distinction between these two modes of representation is tenuous and difficult to uphold. It is also not very important. With motion pictures, the distinction is more elusive still but it is also a great deal more significant. This dissertation is an attempt to explain why this is the case. My argument is that the interrelationship of these two modes of representation influences the development of documentary film and characterizes its break—during the first half of the 1920s—with actuality filmmaking and the newsreel journal format. *Khronika* emerges as the laboratory where this transition takes place, the site where old aesthetic paradigms are overturned and new ones are discovered.

During the first two decades of the 20th century, the use of *khronika* to describe documentary photography recedes and the word becomes synonymous with motion pictures. Like the French word *actualité*—a term used by the earliest film distributors to describe all non-fictional material—*khronika*'s use in pre-Revolutionary Russia spanned event films (coronations, funerals), newsreel journals, and a garden variety of other topical films. In most cases, *actualité* was translated into Russian as *khronika*. In 1912, the French newsreel journal *Gaumont-Actualités* appeared in Russia under the title *Khronika-Gomon*. By 1913 the Khanzhankov firm began releasing regular installments

of *khronika* records of the two Balkan wars (the first wars to be regularly filmed).⁵ A few years later, Skobelev's Cine-Committee's short-lived newsreel journal *A Free Russia* (*Свободная Россия*), released between February and October of 1917, was subtitled as "a weekly *khronika* of events" (еженедельная хроника событий).

The first Soviet film critics and newsreel makers disparaged pre-Revolutionary *khronika* for its monotonous content. In doing so, they referred primarily to the newsreel journals mentioned above. Yet pre-Revolutionary *khronika* was a great deal more inclusive and encompassed a wide variety of actuality films and general interest stories about the lives of the blind or the training of police dogs, to cite a couple of examples from 1915. Though hardly any of these films survive, we know, based on catalogues of non-fiction film in pre-Revolutionary Russia, that more than 70% of non-fiction production was classified as *khronika*. The remaining 30% included scenic panoramas ("видовая картина"), educational ("образовательная"), and nature films ("натура"), the last category being a small and inconsistent group that included everything from travelogues (*Экскурсия на реку чудовую*) to reports on local freaks (*Феномен Кобельков*).⁶

Along with its thematic breadth, *khronika* also encompassed an impressive range of formats. The word could be used to describe an actuality event film showing the Tsar's visit to a World War I battlefield (*Е.И.В. Государь Император в завоеванном крае*), a sequence in a newsreel journal reporting on the same event, a large compilation

⁵ Roshal, Lev *Начало всех начал. Факт на экране и киномысль "Серебряного века"* (Moscow: Materik Press, 2002), 91.

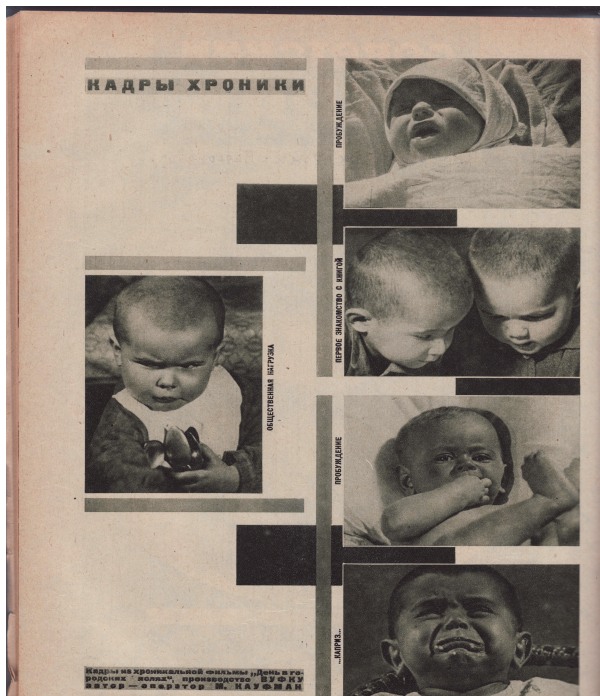
⁶ Vishnevski, Veniamin *Документальные фильмы дореволюционной России. 1907-1916*. (Moscow: Film Museum, 1996). Given how few early non-fiction films survive, Vishnevski's catalogue of titles produced during this period ("Documentary Films of pre-Revolutionary Russia 1907-1916") has been an invaluable resource.

film such as the 6-reel, 1400 meter, *Under the Russian Flag* (*Под Русским Знаменем*) consisting of 91 individual episodes including the Tsar's visit. Finally, *khronika* was also used to describe the same piece of footage stored in the Tsar's personal home movie archive.⁷ Nikolai II had allowed his family to be filmed starting in 1896. Beginning in 1907, pieces of this archive would be shown in cinemas as *Tsarskaya Khronika* (*The Tsar's Khronika*).⁸

What united all these examples under one rubric was the emphasis on *khronika* as the record of a single event, with the idea of an "event" conceived broadly. In film as in photography, the fact that the word *khronika* encompassed a myriad of formats and various representational modes was for some time completely insignificant. As long as sequences in newsreel journals followed the pre-existing templates for presenting events, more on which later, and actuality compilations, such as *Russian Flag*, followed a legible chronology, the difference between raw material and its sequencing into a larger film remained negligible. Both presented a temporal succession. The raw material did so at the level of individual frames, the compilation film and the newsreel journal at the level of individual events.

⁷ Vishnevski, *Документальные фильмы дореволюционной России*, 254.

⁸ Taylor, Richard *The Politics of Soviet cinema 1917-1928* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK, 1979), 10.



[*Khronika* scenes—significant moments in a baby's life—*Soviet Screen* (March 1927)]

The tension hidden within the word rears its head when non-fiction films move past chronological organization while retaining the moniker of *khronika*, as evident in the above photo-montage that presents the life of Soviet toddlers thematically. To be sure, the earliest Soviet non-fiction films were called *khronika* because they resembled their predecessors; the films produced between 1918-1921 differed little from pre-Revolutionary newsreel and Western analogues. In the aftermath of the February Revolution, however, a push for a new form of non-fiction cinema begins to be felt on the ground. The push came from the recognition that *khronika* was documenting the birth of a new society and a new social order. Consequently, as Soviet non-fiction filmmakers begin to move away from the formal language of early non-fiction, they hold on to the term *khronika*, basking in its perceived objectivity and its purported role as an invaluable contributor to the era's historical record.

By 1922, when several anniversary films are commissioned to sum up the first five years of Soviet rule, *khronika* accrues both a certain cachet and a political righteousness, giving non-fiction makers much needed clout in order to obtain production materials from a resource-starved industry. Dziga Vertov, the first pioneer of Soviet documentary, would refer to himself and his collaborators as “khronika workers” well into the 1930s. *Kino-Eye*, arguably Vertov's first documentary feature, was subtitled as “kino-khronika in six parts.”⁹ In fact, Vertov would not use the term *documentary* (документальный фильм) to describe one of his films until *Enthusiasm* in 1930.¹⁰ Even Sergei Eisenstein, who disparaged newsreel and decried its absence of thought, could not resist the word's allure, boasting, “*Potemkin* looks like *khronika*, but functions like a drama.”¹¹

The early Soviet debates over the proper way to produce, edit, and disseminate *khronika* were, in effect, debates about the shape of documentary to come. An understanding of *khronika* as a raw historical record exerted limitations on the organization and sequencing of footage. Alternately, a disparaging view of old newsreel as mere “parades and funerals” fostered new organizational strategies, experiments with title-image relations, and the development of a rich repertoire of montage techniques. The two semantic poles of *khronika* pushed in opposite directions, shaping non-fiction film for much of the 1920s.

The Soviet use of *khronika*—a term with roots in early-film culture—to describe the proliferation of non-fiction film during the 1920s was in marked contrast to documentary schools outside of the Soviet Union. For John Grierson, coining and

⁹ The terms *khronika* and *kinokhronika* are used interchangeably between 1917 and 1927.

¹⁰ Vertov, Dziga *Из Наследия: статьи и выступления* (Moscow: Eisenstein center, 2008), 56.

¹¹ Eisenstein, Sergei *Film Form* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1949), 162.

promoting the term *documentary* was a deliberate strategy to set apart his work with the Empire Marketing Board, as well as the films of Robert Flaherty and others, from earlier more primitive forms of non-fiction film. Newsreel, for Grierson, amounted to little more than dim expressionless records. Unlike film traditions that disparaged newsreel and dismissed it into obscurity, the production of newsreel was the subject of numerous political and social debates in the Soviet Union. These debates put political and social concerns into dialogue with the shifting artistic paradigms of the Russian avant-garde. The attention lavished on *khronika* from all sides gave Soviet documentary the veneer of being an *art form* early on.¹² *Khronika* was first embraced as an artistic practice in 1922 in the pages of the journal *Kino-Fot* published by Aleksei Gan and steeped in Gan's understanding of Constructivism. Five years later, a group of influential critics associated with the *New LEF* journal, and indebted to a different strain of Constructivist thought, would seek to purify newsreel as a form of visual information that is free from additional, distinctly cinematic, types of signification.

As non-fiction film evolved beyond short single-reel reports into feature-length productions, the limitations inherent in using *khronika* to describe an increasingly broad range of material were recognized, leading to a series of augmentations, redefinitions, and reformulations. Other terms appeared to round out the picture: *kino-lecture*, *agitka*, *kulturfilm*, *kino-ocherk*, *nauchno-populiarnaya kartina*, *neigrovoye kino* et al. Each one of them sheds light on various aspects of documentary's emergence as a medium. But of all the terms used to describe non-fiction film during this decade, *khronika* is singularly significant as the site around which the critical discourse about the meaning and

¹² July, Liudmila *Документальный Иллюзион* (Moscow: Materik, 2005), 6.

expressive potentials of documentary media coalesced. It would remain so until the arrival of sound documentary.

In some sense, it is *khronika*'s inadequacy in describing the full range of non-fiction film produced in the 1920s that makes the term such an exquisite mirror for thinking about documentary as such. Discussions of *khronika* almost always required a caveat. Critic and filmmaker Vladimir Erofeev argued that technological advances made it possible to transcend the limitations of the term.¹³ The cinematographer Mikhail Kaufman made suggestions as to how “*khronika* can become real cinema.”¹⁴ Describing the reception of his *Kino-Pravda* newsreel journal Dziga Vertov stressed that audience sympathies with his approach to *khronika* led him to “exert more pressure on the raw material.”¹⁵ An early champion of “all types of *khronika*,” Vertov nonetheless acknowledged the limitations of the term and claimed that his own films were something else and presented “a union of science and *khronika*.”¹⁶ Between 1924 and 1927, film critics would use *khronika* both as a term of praise and of opprobrium.¹⁷ Viktor Shklovsky, in his famous 1926 critique of *Stride, Soviet!* claimed that *khronika* had been deprived of its soul because of Vertov's refusal to annotate his footage with dates and locations.¹⁸

At the 1927 *New LEF* Symposium, the influential writer and *factographer* Sergei Tretiakov proclaimed:

¹³ July, *Документальный Иллюзион*, 29.

¹⁴ July, *Документальный Иллюзион*, 31.

¹⁵ Vertov, *Из Наследия: статьи и выступления*, 50.

¹⁶ Vertov, *Dziga Kino-Eye: the writings of Dziga Vertov* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 41.

¹⁷ An overview of both accolades and criticism is found in Tsivian, Yuri ed. *Lines of Resistance: Dziga Vertov and The Twenties*. (Pordenone, Italy: Le Giornate del Cinema Muto, 2004)

¹⁸ Tsivian, *Lines of Resistance*, 170.

Pure *khronika* is the montage of selected facts selected only for their currency and their social significance. But when a fact is taken as a brick for a construction of another sort, the pure *khronika* disappears.¹⁹

Tretiakov, like many other like-minded critics in the late 1920s, sought to purify *khronika*, to stabilize its fluctuations of meaning, to define the term as raw material, containing objective historical meaning, and remaining unaltered by the film's additional powers of signification. But the limitations of such a prescriptive view were likewise immediately recognized.

The endless debates made *khronika* into a term that was continuously modified, revised, revisited. Each turn in this conceptual history amounts to a step in the development of documentary film. Oscillating between the raw documentary material and the structured film, *khronika* fulfilled the full range of expectations placed on non-fiction film. Existing as an umbrella term for documentary throughout the 1920s, the word obscured the line between recorded event and its symbolic meaning, between history and historiography.

What follows is a series of variations on the story of why, during the first decade of the Soviet film industry, the word *khronika* is untranslatable. This decade in the life of *khronika* reveals a part of early documentary history that has remained unexamined. These variations consider Soviet *khronika* in different keys: as a continuation of early film practice, as an extension of the Bolshevik government's drive to consolidate power, as a system of meaning making born of extreme material scarcity, as a visual extension of concepts such as *agitation* and *propaganda*, as a filmic adaptation of journalistic templates, as an attempt to conceive of information through the paradigm of production art. The picture that emerges is greater than the sum of the individual variations and

¹⁹ Jacobs, Lewis *The Documentary Tradition* (London, UK: W.W. Norton & Company, 1971), 29.

provides a multi-faceted account documentary's emergence as a medium for making sense of the world. Placing *khronika* into dialogue with the emergence of documentary, in turn, engages the crucial and problematic issue of film's function as an informational medium.

Moving through these variations on the meaning of *khronika*, I occasionally leave the Soviet Union and reflect on the history and theory of documentary film, theories of pre-linguistic meaning, conceptions of scientific objectivity, communication theory, philosophy, and visual rhetoric. My expansion into other intellectual territories underscores my belief that communication media, including motion pictures, have the capacity to transform human thought. What follows is an attempt to grapple with this belief, to investigate Soviet *khronika* in order to discover what it was that documentary learned to express during its first tumultuous decade.

ii. Documentary's two claims: a story of origins.

“The world, in documentary, is destined to bear propositions.”²⁰ This statement, found in Bill Nichols’ *Representing Reality*, has for several years been a catalyst in my thinking about the emergence of documentary film and its relation to the non-fiction filmmaking that came before. Histories of documentary film typically describe, usually in an introduction, early non-fiction cinema as a proto-history that ends in the early 1920s with the appearance of films substantive enough to be called *documentary*. In the same introductory section, one also often comes across the idea that documentaries transcend their predecessors—newsreel journals and actuality films—by contributing interpretive content to the photographic record of an event.

This idea of documentary as an interpretation of reality also underwrites Nichols’ claim above. To say that documentaries bear propositions is to say that documentaries, even the most non-intrusive ethnographic varieties, simultaneously preserve and interpret an event, offering both evidence and discourse, a record of reality and an argument about it. Put another way, documentary films make two claims on the image, the first referential, the second propositional and characterized by an “assertive stance.”²¹

The idea of a second propositional claim that co-exists with the original visual record of an event (the first claim) is found in the writings of documentarians, historians, and theorists alike. The notion that documentaries enriched earlier formats by adding interpretive content is already present in the first history of non-fiction film—Paul Rotha’s *Documentary Film* (1935). The same hypothesis appears virtually unchanged in

²⁰ Nichols, Bill *Representing Reality: issues and concepts in documentary*. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991),114.

²¹ While I borrow the term “assertive stance” from Carl Plantinga’s *Rhetoric and Representation in Non-fiction Film* versions of this view are held by Bill Nichols, Michael Renov, Erik Barnouw, Sergei Drobashenko, Dai Vaughan, Noel Carroll, Brian Winston, Lewis Jacobs, and Edward Branigan.

Jack Ellis' and Betsy MacLane's recent *A New History of Documentary Film* (2007). Evoked for various ends, this *two claims hypothesis* recurs with enough frequency as to be worthy of a deeper look.

John Grierson, the man credited with bringing the word *documentary* into English usage in 1926, claimed that films such as Robert Flaherty's *Moana* were a "higher form of filmmaking."²² Dwelling below these higher specimens were newsreels and early actuality films, which Grierson dismissed as:

dim records...essentially *unreal*, reflecting hardly anything worth preserving of the times they recorded...among the foundation stones, the pompous parades, the politicians on pavements, and even among the smoking ruins of mine disasters and the backs of distressed ships, it is difficult to think that anything *real* of our troubled day has been recorded. The newsreel has gone dithering on, mistaking the phenomenon for the thing in itself, and ignoring everything that gave it the trouble of conscience and penetration and thought.²³

In Grierson's ingenious use of *real* vs. *unreal* here, flashes of the *two claims hypothesis* are already evident. Albeit somewhat imprecisely, Grierson invokes the Kantian distinction between phenomena and things-in-themselves in order to bifurcate the concept of *reality*. Having split reality in two, Grierson offers a curious definition of *real* as that which manifests thought. As a consequence of Grierson's stark division, the films that preceded documentary turn out to be unreal, and could thus be dismissed as disorganized phenomena, deaf and dumb impressions, simple transcriptions of the world. Equating early non-fiction film with *phenomena* in this way inscribes a duality into the documentary image by adding a transparent layer of thought to the original representation.

²² Grierson, John *Grierson on Documentary* (London, UK: Faber&Faber, 1971), p. 201.

²³ Grierson, *Grierson on Documentary*, 201.

By emphasizing this second interpretive layer, Grierson severs documentary from its predecessors and insinuates that the break had been a clean one. Following Grierson, the notion of documentary's clean break with its past was reenforced by Paul Rotha. Widely considered to be the first historian of documentary, Rotha dismissed early non-fiction and posited the films of Flaherty, Grierson, Vertov, Cavalcanti, and Ruttman as a "genuine independent kind of cinema."²⁴ Their precursors were simply:

plain, descriptive pictures of everyday life (travel pictures, nature films, educational, and newsreels) that fall short of documentary requirements and the creative dramatisation of actuality and the expression of social analysis that are the first demand of the documentary method.²⁵

Much as Grierson had done before, Rotha disparages early non-fiction film for its lack of thought ("social analysis") and stresses "personal vision" and "creative dramatization." Doing so, he introduced into film history the notion that the "first documentaries" were those non-fiction films that first realized Rudolf Arnheim's idea of "film as art."

To be fair, the range of non-fiction film produced by 1935—the year Rotha's *Documentary Film* is published—made some focalization necessary on his part. But Rotha's lack of critical inquiry into the social and informational requirements bestowed on non-fiction film has not been without consequence for our understanding of non-fiction film. The most immediate consequence has been the tendency to overlook the formal influence of documentary's predecessors. Early film historian Stephen Bottomore explains some of the ramifications of Rotha's and Grierson's biases as follows:

all the travelogues, industrial, interest, advertising, scientific, and other films made from the 1890s were suddenly consigned to the outer darkness, for Rotha only considered films which had a certain 'personal' vision to be real documentaries. This has contributed to a skewing in scholarly work on the history of documentaries, with far more interest in the exceptional

²⁴ Rotha, Paul *A Paul Rotha Reader* (Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press, 2000), p.148.

²⁵ Rotha, *A Paul Rotha Reader*, 148.

productions, major 'art' documentaries, fiction/non-fiction hybrids, etc, and less interest in the workaday travelogues, industrial and advertising films.²⁶

To Bottomore's assessment I would add that excessive emphasis on an artist's personal vision have been equally damaging to our understanding of the first documentaries themselves, the very films that Rotha and Grierson wish to celebrate. Many of the first documentaries were commissioned and later exhibited as industrial, scientific, and educational productions. John Grierson's most influential work was made during his time as head of non-fiction production at Britain's Empire Marketing Board (EMB), a national trade agency. Vertov's *The Man With the Movie Camera* (1929)—a gold standard for avant-garde documentary and a film with a pronounced personal artistic vision—was pitched to VUFKU studio as an educational movie about film production, an analogue to earlier industrial films about coal mining or radio transmission.

The view that early non-fiction film was a series of artless blank slates is part of documentary's creation myth according to which the form's pioneers infused art into what had lingered as merely a technological process. In addition to casting 25 years of early non-fiction film into the shadows, the emphasis on "film as art" has made us myopic to the responsibilities bestowed on documentary films, such as communicative success and informational plenitude. The problem with this is deeper than the omission that results whenever any canon is formed. While we may recognize that a given documentary was produced for a non-artistic purpose, we often lack the analytical tools to engage with the way such requirements impact the formal language of documentary.

Examining the work of the first documentaries alongside early non-fiction predecessors reveals how the concept of "documentary" emerged not out of an instinct to

²⁶ Bottomore, Stephen "Rediscovering Early Non-Fiction Film" in *Film History* Vol. 13 No.2 (2001): 165.

preserve reality but from the need to augment and supplant it. Reflecting on Grierson's early essays, the film theorist Phil Rosen makes a similar point:

We see the documentary tradition—that spoken of by Grierson as the higher form of “filming actuality”—self-consciously inventing itself. In this invention, there is rarely if ever unvarnished faith in the possibility or, more tellingly, the utility of a complete record of the surface of reality. While some would argue more strongly for the check that “reality” might place on the filmmaking, it was from the beginning a lasting truism of the documentary tradition that patterning, rhetoric, artistry, or something had to be added to the indexical capacity of the medium.²⁷

Even though Grierson was among the earliest to equate documentaries with the existence of two separate claims, his excessive focus on the “*creative* treatment of actuality” has led him and those that embraced his view of documentary's emergence *ex nihilo* to neglect the central conceptual issue at the heart of documentary practice: the tension between documentary's two claims, between film-as-record and film-as-argument. Film historian John MacKay labels this relationship the “conceptual knot” at the center of both documentary theory and practice, a knot born of:

the tension between relatively autonomous indexical traces of a real past, and the control of pastness, the sequencing and signifying work performed upon those (photographic) traces.²⁸

Reflecting on the tension Mackay describes above, I return once again to Nichols' statement: “the world, in documentary, is destined to bear propositions.” What draws me to this statement is the verb choice. To bear a proposition is not only to convey it but also to carry it, to be branded by it and responsible for it. In the context of documentary's creation story and its dismissal of early non-fiction, *to bear* reminds us that there was no readymade way to combine motion pictures with informational content and that the

²⁷ Rosen, Phil *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 233.

²⁸ Mackay, John “Film Energy: Process and Metanarrative in Dziga Vertov's *The Eleventh Year* (1928)” in *OCTOBER* No. 121 (2007): 73.

process through which this occurs should not to be taken for granted. The discomfort inherent in *to bear* restores the tension smoothed over by Grierson and Rotha, a tension born of the heterogeneity of particular images and the meaning they are made to convey in a documentary film.

For Rotha, Grierson and many others since, dismissing early non-fiction was a way to identify a point of origin for documentary film. I explore the conceptual underpinning of the *two claims hypothesis* in search of origins as well, albeit origins in a different sense. In *The World Viewed* the philosopher Stanley Cavell suggests that when considering the question of artistic origins we tend to overemphasize historical details, and, in doing so, obscure origins of another sort. Cavell writes:

The facts are well enough known about the invention and the inventors of the camera, and about improvements in fixing it and then moving the image it captures. The problem is that the invention of the photographic picture is not the same thing as the creation of photography as a medium for making sense. The historical problem is like any other: a chronicle of the facts preceding the appearance of this technology does not explain why it happened when and as it did.²⁹

Given the tendency, of practitioners and theorists both, to reduce early non-fiction practice to what is effectively a blank stare, one can't help but recognize that the problem Cavell describes is only amplified in the case of documentary.

Throughout this work I refer to documentary as a medium because of my interest in uncovering how motion pictures become capable of making sense. How do motion pictures transcend their illustrative function in early non-fiction? Do they come to express something that their predecessors could not? To get at these questions, I chart the historical emergence of Soviet *khronika* as a medium of art gradually revealing its potentialities. Cavell describes this process as follows:

²⁹ Cavell, Stanley *The World Viewed* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 38.

Only the art itself can discover its possibilities, and the discovery of a new possibility is the discovery of a new medium. A medium is something through which or by means of which something specific gets done or said in particular ways. It provides, one might say, particular ways to get through to someone, to make sense, in art, they are forms, like forms of speech.³⁰

Like Cavell, I wish to avoid defining *medium* in strictly technological terms. *Medium*, for Cavell, is a Wittgensteinian concept—its attributes constitute a "fuzzy" set based on resemblances of expressive possibilities rather than essential traits. As such, a medium is easier to describe than define. In this way Cavell breaks with the common usage of the term *medium*, which designates all film as a single medium based on the congruence of several technological factors. Cavell tells us that "reproducing the world is the only thing film does automatically " to underscore that the technical ability to record phenomena says virtually nothing about film's expressive possibilities.³¹ A medium, in Cavell's sense, is similar to *genre* because of its gradual formation over time. Such a perspective on film history offers a corrective to an obvious, yet often overlooked, limitation of *auteur* theory, that it blinds us to "the relation of a given *oeuvre* to the medium that has made a place for it."³²

To my mind, there are three main benefits in considering documentary as a medium and in shifting emphasis from particular films, formats, or directors to the gradual discovery of documentary's unique expressive pathways. The three benefits can be ordered cardinally, the insights of the first being necessary for the second and so on. First, as discussed above, broadening of the documentary field beyond the feature-length format avoids some of the limitations inherent in the "film as art" bias. Second, moving past glib dismissals of early non-fiction as mere "dim records" allows one to consider

³⁰ Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 32.

³¹ Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 103.

³² Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 9.

how documentaries altered and enriched pre-existing forms of expression. This means considering how earlier templates (e.g. the newsreel journal) and formats (e.g. the travelogue) influenced documentary production and how documentary enriched its predecessors. The second advantage engages the *two claims hypothesis*. It complicates the first claim—the purported purity and naïveté of early non-fiction and then, turning to the second claim and documentary's interpretive function, explores the concrete ways in which the first documentaries endowed pre-existing formats with thought, argument, propositional content, etc. The continuities that exist between early non-fiction and the first documentaries do not invalidate the position that a substantive rift exists between the two periods. With reference to the work of contemporary film theorists, I ask whether it is conceptually sound to suggest that documentary images exhibit a fundamentally different relationship to the task of representation than their predecessors.

The above two advantages are historical and aesthetic, respectively. They enrich our understanding of documentary's evolution as a film form and, by virtue of telling the story of Soviet newsreel, explore a virtually unstudied piece of film history. Having clarified the meaning of each of the two claims individually, I turn to the dynamic nature of their co-existence. This aspect of documentary poetics has, up to now, remained under-theorized. Analytical writing on non-fiction film tends to focus on the broad rhetorical strategies used to convey a message to an audience. *How do documentaries present evidence? How do they establish authority? What are the techniques used to tell the story?*³³

³³ I am thinking here of the stated goals in Michael Renov's *Theorizing the Documentary*, Erik Barnouw's *Documentary: a history of the non-fiction film*, and Bill Nichols' *Representing Reality*.

While there has been a great deal of critical literature on the rhetorical power of documentary, there is an absence of vocabulary that describes the relationship between documentary's analytical and referential claims. Yet this broad epistemological foundation is crucial for understanding the production and transmission of information through the combination of verbal and visual elements. My study of Soviet *khronika* is a corrective to this and focuses first on the concrete mechanisms by which motion pictures stand-in for general statements about the world and only thereafter considers the large-scale rhetorical strategies on display.

Non-fiction filmmaking in Soviet Russia is a perfect case study for looking at the relationship between documentary's two claims. The decade of Soviet *khronika* under review is marked by repeated attempts from all sides to grapple with motion pictures as a form of visual information. Different conceptions of film meaning alternate during this period. Two competing theories emerge. The first posits meaning as a closed set of fixed, stable units, modeled on the linguistic proposition. The second model of film meaning is open-ended and in flux. Better adept at rendering signification as a process occurring over time, this model resonates with what Umberto Eco describes as pre-linguistic theories of meaning, in particular the semiotic theory of C.S. Peirce.³⁴

I must be clear here and stress that the two ways of modeling meaning do not line up tidily with the *two claims hypothesis*. It is not the case that one model describes the first claim, the other—the second. The two models of meaning are, to a great extent, mutually exclusive. More than anything, *the two claims hypothesis* is a response to this apparent exclusivity and an attempt to scaffold documentary practice by pointing to an

³⁴ For more on this see Eco, Umberto *Kant and the Platypus: Essays on Language and Cognition* (New York, NY: Harcourt Inc., 2000).

uneasy co-existence between record and interpretation. The history of Soviet newsreel offers plenty of evidence for this. The debates over *khronika* reveal deep-seated uncertainty about which model of meaning best described film's ability to deliver informational content. Linking the historical uncertainty over the nature of film meaning with the philosophical foundation of the question reveals the striving for a co-existence of the two claims as more than just infighting among Soviet critics and filmmakers. Instead, one sees the uneasy co-existence of the two claims as documentary's existential paradox, a theoretical *telos* that can't be reached but must nonetheless be pursued.

In his recent book *The Information* James Gleick echoes Cavell's use of *medium* when he writes: "Every new medium transforms the nature of human thought."³⁵ With the alphabet as a founding technology of information, the hegemony of language in structuring experience is widely acknowledged and studied. Recently, there has been widespread recognition that the delivery of information increasingly occurs via a hybrid medium that integrates verbal and visual elements. The onset of new information technology has been widely acknowledged. But, as W.J.T. Mitchell points out, we rarely train scholars in the humanities and social sciences to be sensitive to the crucial point of conflict, influence and mediation of verbal and visual content.³⁶ This lack of sensitivity limits our understanding of contemporary media culture as well as our knowledge of the past. To cite one notable, and perhaps overstated, example, Hayden White in "Historiography and Historiophoty" has argued that history as a discipline has

³⁵ Gleick, James *The Information*, "Prologue." ePUB format.

³⁶ Mitchell, W.J.T. "Diagrammatology" in *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 7, No. 3 (Spring 1981): 627.

systematically failed to address the specificity of visual material, reducing it to mere illustrations, simple complements to written discourse.³⁷

Thus, the third advantage of considering documentary as a medium is both philosophical and uniquely contemporary. Exploring documentary origins enables us to reflect on the transition from a verbo-centric model of information delivery to one that increasingly integrates visual and verbal elements. As part of this process, visual material acquires substantial autonomy in the delivery of information; such greater autonomy transforms the meaning conveyed. The consequences of this transition between media models have not been sufficiently considered in the context of information technology, the sphere where those consequences, arguably, carry the most weight. As we shall see, our lack of sensitivity to the mediation of the visual and verbal has been particularly pronounced with respect to temporally based media.

The story of Soviet *khronika* puts a magnifying glass over the transition from early non-fiction to documentary. I magnify this historical moment because it is symptomatic of a larger historical transformation in the way humans receive information and learn about the world beyond their first-hand experience. The digital revolution—translating image, music, and text into binary code and transmitting all three with equal ease—has put this transition into overdrive. If Mitchell, White, and countless others are correct, we still have a long way to go in coming to terms with the transformation underway. This dissertation takes us back in time to the moment when the foundations of old media first begin to crumble.

³⁷ Hayden, White “Historiography and Historiophoty” in *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 93, No. 5 (December 1988): 1193-1199.

iii. Reality – recorded but not documented.

After being demobilized from the Red Army in 1922, Mikhail Kaufman visited his brother Dennis (Dziga Vertov) who, having worked his way up from secretary, had become the head of the *khronika* division at the All-Russian Photo Cine Department(VFKO).³⁸ At the VFKO headquarters in Moscow, Kaufman caught up on the current events of the previous years by watching the department's entire *khronika* collection. The material included pre-revolutionary newsreel journals from Pathé and Gaumont, actuality footage filmed by the Khanzhankov company, war footage collected by the Skobelev cine-committee, Civil War compilations, his brother's own *Kino-Week* newsreel journal.

Kaufman was fascinated by the visual portrait of the epoch unfolding before his eyes. His brother, however, was less enthused. Whenever the slogan *Pathé sees all and knows all* appeared on screen, Vertov liked to parry and say that the journal sees virtually nothing, knows and thinks even less.³⁹ One suspects that Vertov uttered these words with a great deal of exasperation. By 1922, he had already spent three years searching, mostly in vain, for an alternative, distinctly Soviet *khronika* that could transcend the formats that had ossified during the previous 25 years.

Like John Grierson, Vertov was dismissive of newsreel journals and never shy about pointing out the superiority of his own work. From the outset, he sought to make a clean break with the newsreel journal of the past. An early Futurist poem titled "Start" charted the path that Vertov intended for newsreel:

³⁸ At the time of Vertov's joining the organization was called the Moscow Cine-Committee.

³⁹ This anecdote appears in several recollections published in Vertova-Svilova, E. ed., *Дзига Вертов в воспоминаниях современников* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1976).

Not like Pathé
 Not Like Gaumont.
Not how they see,
 Not as they want.
Be Newton
 to see
 an apple.
Give people eyes
To see a dog
With Pavlov's eye.
Is cinema CINEMA?
We blow up cinema,
For
 CINEMA
 To be seen.⁴⁰

Vertov is believed to have backdated the manuscript of this poem to 1917 for symbolic purposes—greater symmetry with the political events of that year. Even though the poem was likely written several years later, Vertov's eagerness to surpass the form and function of early newsreel in favor of a more analytic cinema may have been there all along. No matter the strength of his conviction, Vertov's development as a filmmaker took place within the strict formats and the aesthetic defaults of actuality filmmaking. Thus, before turning to the Soviet-specific factors that affected *khronika*, I will first discuss its aesthetic and organizational inheritance. By this, I mean the visual grammar adhered to in actuality cinematography, the image-text relationships codified in the newsreel journal format, the organizational tendencies—of newsreels and actualities both—that emphasized the discreteness of individual shots and their lack of interconnectivity.

The 1904 Pathé-Frère distribution catalog described the term *actualité* as “scenes of general and international interest, which are so important that they will be able to thrill the masses.”⁴¹ Actualities dominated the output of the major film companies—Pathé, Gaumont, Edison, Biograph—until 1906. Though the term originally suggested a degree

⁴⁰ Tsivian ed., *Lines of Resistance*, 35.

⁴¹ Cited in Abel, Richard ed. *The Encyclopedia of Early Cinema* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2005), 6.

of newsworthiness, and would do so until the first newsreel journals in 1908, it has over time become an umbrella term, covering popular and research studies, sport and nature films, travel and scenic views, picturesque and visual occupations, topical personalities and events, fight and wrestling films, depictions of exotic locales.⁴²

While thematically diverse, actuality films were staid stylistically. Cinema's earliest known formal innovations—traveling camera, panning, multiple-shot constructions—appeared in actualities. But after the first innovative decade there was little stylistic development in non-fiction film. Whereas fiction films formally developed in concert with the breakthroughs in continuity editing, actualities continued to adhere to pre-existing notions of the picturesque, developed in painting, photography and 19th century lantern shows.

One reason for the stylistic plateau may be the expansion of the Pathé Frères international empire. Starting in 1904, the company set its sight on the global film market, decentralizing production, and opening branches in major metropolitan centers in Europe and the United States. By 1908, only 10% of Pathé's income came from the domestic French market.⁴³ As early film historian Nikolai Izvolov has pointed out, discounting the 10-15% of local interest films and differences in exhibition practices, non-fiction film programming was uniform in most urban sectors.⁴⁴ Moreover, unlike studio productions of fiction films, which clustered collaborators together in a studio, decentralized production of non-fiction may have hindered formal development by perpetuating pre-approved formats.

⁴² Jacobs ed., *The Documentary Tradition*, 3-5.

⁴³ Dahlquist, Marina "Global vs. Local: The Case of Pathé" in *Film History* Vol. 17.1 (2005): 37.

⁴⁴ Nikolai Izvolov – private correspondence. 10/13/2011.

Along with differences in production, the incongruous stylistic development of fiction and non-fiction during the first two decades of the 20th century was the product of conceptual differences. While fiction films were increasingly thought of as stories, actuality films continued showing the world, in Tom Gunning's words, as a “consumable picture.”⁴⁵ The distinction may seem trivial but it is of paramount importance. While fiction film began to be thought of as unfolding and developing over time, the actuality film's *raison d'être* remained static, beginning and ending with the fact of recording.

The asymmetry in the formal development of actualities and narrative films helps explain why for a long time the study of non-fiction remained uncharted territory.⁴⁶ Recent research into early non-fiction film has created a more nuanced understanding of this “outer darkness” of documentary, unearthing the complex factors that conditioned production, exhibition, and reception.⁴⁷ Not unexpectedly, the scholarship has offered several contenders for the *first documentary* title (*90° South*, *The Battle of Somme*, *The Baltic Fleet* et al.). More significant, however, is shedding of much needed light on the norms that conditioned early cinema's *not so simple* bearing of witness.

From the very beginning, actualities had to reconcile the conventions of photography and painting with cinematography's ability to record duration. As Gerry Turvey has shown in his study of early British actualities (1895-1901), the continuities with 19th century visual art were prominent:

Alongside matters of composition, the actuality discourse also offered commentary specifying those picture qualities - other than image clarity - that filmmakers believed should distinguish their photographs. These qualities were

⁴⁵ Gunning, Tom “The World as Object Lesson: Cinema Audiences, Visual Culture, and the St. Louis World Fair, 1904” in *Film History* Vol. 6 No. 4 (Winter 1994): 422-444.

⁴⁶ I refer here to Hertogs, Daan & Nicode Klerk ed. *Uncharted Territory: Essays on Early Non-Fiction Film*. (Amsterdam: Nederlands Filmmuseum, 1997).

⁴⁷ Particularly notable has been the work of Charles Musser, Richard Abel, Yuri Tsivian, David Levy, LevRoshal, Tom Gunning, Andre Gaudreault and Stephen Bottomore amongst others.

largely taken over from the evaluative vocabulary that had been developed for painting and that had been taken up by nineteenth century photography. Thus, one of the most frequently applied aesthetic terms for location views was 'picturesque'.⁴⁸

The importance ascribed to pictorialism is best understood in connection with the role *recognition* played in early film spectatorship.⁴⁹ Whether to see oneself "cinema-ed" at a recent parade or to catch glimpses of a son or brother fighting in the war, recognition was one of early cinema's greatest draws.

The thrill of recognition contributed to the success and prominence of portrait films. In pre-Revolutionary Russia, the Pathé Frères regularly advertised their "filming of Russian writers, preferably in their homes."⁵⁰ The most sensational of these literary portraits were those of Lev Tolstoy done by the Drankov company in 1908 and by Pathé in 1909. Given Tolstoy's cult-like status in Russia at the time, it is not surprising that footage of the elderly writer would arouse considerable interest. Yet, as one account published in 1910 suggests, the fascination was as much with the subject as with the possibilities of what can be transmitted via the screen:

Yesterday I saw Lev Tolstoy at the cinematograph. I Saw Lev Tolstoy! I saw him, alive on the screen, while in a small screening hall, with about a hundred others. Although it was almost totally dark, it was clear that all those assembled there very genuinely touched by this unexpected gift of cinematography. They saw Tolstoy and they felt something cleansing. And if you ask how I know this, I can tell you: because I felt it first hand.⁵¹

The sense of wonder that pervades the writer's response reminds us of what is easy for modern viewers to overlook: for the early cinema spectator, recognition was not a flash of identification but a gradual process. More like a prolonged exploration of the image

⁴⁸ Turvey, Gerry "Panoramas, Parades and the Picturesque: The Aesthetics of British Actuality Films, 1895-1901" in *Film History*, Vol. 16, No. 1 Early British Cinema (2004), p. 9-27.

⁴⁹ Smither, Roger "Watch the Picture Carefully, and See If You Can Identify Anyone": Recognition in Films of the First World War Period" in *Film History* Vol. 14 No. 3/4 (2002), 390-404.

⁵⁰ Roshal, *Начало всех начал*, 19.

⁵¹ "Cine-Fono," 1910, No. 7, January. Cited in Roshal, *Начало всех начал*, 15.

than a burst of discovery. This made emphasis on pictorialism doubly entrenched, so to speak. The same visual norms continued a vein of pre-existing visual art and, at the same time, catered to the novelty of spectator's initial awe-struck response to moving photographic images. These aesthetic criteria were perpetrated by enthusiastic responses, as in the description of the Tolstoy portrait, but mostly by the numerous complaints about worn-out prints, lack of sharpness, definition, and a myriad other deficiencies that impeded recognition.⁵²

Required to facilitate the audience's unfolding recognition, the early cinematographers had to address the need, not present in painting or photography, for the footage to exhibit a specific sequential or spatial logic, which could add structure to the event on the screen. Starting at the very beginning, with the Lumières' *Workers Leaving the Factory* (1895), actualities display concern over the structure of a shot over time. In single shot actualities, the shooter's focus was on the way an activity unfolds over time; shots with a clearly articulated beginning, middle, and end, were preferred as they suggested a completed process. Many early Lumière films recorded actions and events in which the end either rejoins or inversely mirrors the beginning (opening and closing the factory gates in *Workers Leaving the Factory*), in order to provide something akin to effective narrative closure.⁵³ Such temporal structuring persists into the multi-shot era and continues to reinforce the identification of a shot/sequence with a completed event instead of with the film as a greater whole, as was beginning to be the case for fiction films.

⁵² Yuri Tsivian provides many wonderful examples of this in *Early Cinema in Russia and Its Cultural Reception* (Chicago, IL: University Of Chicago Press, 1998).

⁵³ Elsaesser, Thomas *Early cinema: Space frame, narrative* ed. Elsaesser & Barker. (London, UK: British Film Institute, 1990), 15.

After the arrival of editing, multiple shot actualities held on to a *tableau vivant* aesthetic and presented a series of independent views. Of the many actualities produced between 1904 and 1920, the industrial films stand out as pushing forward the organizational norms of the single shot era. Together with the travelogues, industrial films are most directly influential on early documentaries. Films such as Pathé Frères' *Astrakhan Fish Factory* (1908) or *How They Make Cheese in Holland* (1909) reveal an "operational aesthetic," as Neil Harris has called it, and trace the birth of a consumer product by applying a proto-narrative logic to the sequence of shots.⁵⁴ Each process on display follows from the one that preceded it, imbuing the film with a teleological drive. The logic of production on display, however, remained subservient to a unity of time and obeyed a chronology. In films like *Fish Factory* the logic of production and the chronology of a workday are co-extensive and never in conflict. As we shall see in future variations, one of the most significant early breaks from the aesthetics of industrial actualities occurs when chronology becomes subservient to the logic of the film.

Tom Gunning has described the visual style of early actualities as manifesting a *view aesthetic*. An offshoot of Gaudreault's and Gunning's influential *cinema of attractions*—an exhibitionist, non-voyeuristic cinema designed to satisfy visual curiosity—the *view aesthetic* is a concept specifically tailored to the interplay of apparatus and reality at work in non-fiction filmmaking. A *view aesthetic* is dedicated to preserving a vantage point.⁵⁵ Early non-fiction, according to Gunning, doesn't simply show a place or an event, but "mime(s) the act of looking and observing."⁵⁶ Associating

⁵⁴ Harris, Neil *Humbug: the art of P.T. Barnum* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 57.

⁵⁵ Gunning, "Before documentary: early non-fiction films and the 'view' aesthetic" in *Uncharted Territory*, 9-24.

⁵⁶ Gunning, "Before documentary", 17.

the camera with a physical presence implies faith in the camera's epistemological capabilities and, more broadly, belief in knowledge through vision. At the level of cinematography, such belief is made manifest in the frequency of 180-degree pans, traveling shots, and other camera movements that mimic the optical exploration of a locale.

Even a brief reflection on early film aesthetics complicates the notion that documentary's precursors were mere blank slates. The *view aesthetic* was a part of documentary's inheritance and represented norms and habits that had to be overcome before the expressive possibilities of a new medium could be discovered. In concrete terms, this inheritance can be seen in the production norms given to cinematographers in the pre-documentary era. Alexander Lemberg, who began his career shooting for Pathé and Gaumont newsreel, described his job requirements as follows:

What was required was essentially a protocol – true, accurate, and without any pretense to generalization. This explains our habit of shooting from two positions, providing only long shots, avoiding any tight shots or accents on individual details.⁵⁷

Lemberg's observations reveal the way that the aesthetics of actuality filmmaking shaped thinking about the information conveyed by the material. The connection between shooting practice and a shot's meaning is evident in Lemberg's emphasis on the shooter's requirement to avoid "any pretense to generalization." Written decades later—decades spent working in Soviet newsreel—Lemberg's remarks reveal his recognition that images can represent more than just themselves. In addition to their ability to bear witness, documentary motion pictures have an informational capacity. The first significant attempt

⁵⁷ Svilova-Vertova ed., *Вертов в воспоминаниях*, p. 81

for structuring and packaging moving images as a source of information was the newsreel journal.

iv. The newsreel journal—cinema's informational turn.

The terms *newsreel* and *actuality* are often used interchangeably. This confusion is to be expected. Early cinema culture was one of recompilation and, footage-wise, newsreel journals were made-up of topical actualities and news event films. Starting with the 1895 footage of the Dreyfus affair, news events were regularly re-used in retrospective compilation films or became illustrations in public lectures.⁵⁸ Like most actualities, newsreel journals presented a series of long shots, with closer shots reserved for important individuals and portrait galleries.⁵⁹

With the rise of the feature length fiction film, actualities, though still produced, were dislodged from early cinema programs. Around the same time, the newsreel journal rose in stature, becoming a staple of theatrical exhibition and remaining that way until well after WWII. The first newsreel journal, *Pathé Fait-Divers*, arrived in 1908. Though not the sole distributor and producer of newsreel, the Pathé-Frères company—cinema's first multinational empire—was far and away newsreel's largest and most influential purveyor; Pathé's "newsreel journal" template was followed by the company's main rivals *Gaumont Actualités*, *Éclair-Journal*, *Eclipse-Journal* and many other smaller outfits.⁶⁰ In Russia, Pathé dominated the scene, maintaining offices in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Odessa, as well as a distribution branch in Rostov.⁶¹ Though Khanzhankov and Drankov firms, and later the Skobelev Cine-Committee would release their own "animated newspapers," as newsreel journals were sometimes called, these were not much different

⁵⁸ Leyda, Jay *Films Beget Films* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 4.

⁵⁹ Hicks, Jeremy *Dziga Vertov: defining documentary film* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 5-6.

⁶⁰ For more info on the international proliferation of newsreel see Abel, Richard (1999) *The Red Rooster Scare: Making Cinema American, 1900–1910*, (Berkeley: University of California Press) Bowser, Eileen (1990) *The Transformation of Cinema, 1907–1915*, New York: Scribner's.

⁶¹ Abel, Richard "Pathé's Stake in Early Russian Cinema," *Griffithiana*, 38/39 (1990):242–247.

from Pathé. The stranglehold that the company held over the format of non-fiction helps explain why the company name was often invoked throughout the 1920s as shorthand to describe all pre-Revolutionary newsreel.

Despite being visually indiscernible from actuality films, the newsreel journal was a significant development for non-fiction film as it codified a template for presenting information through the use of motion pictures. Newsreel journals were from the start something of a bastard genre. Like newspapers, newsreel journals were collections of disparate stories, each about a minute long. Typically starting with a large-scale public event (military procession, coronation, state funerals), each issue covered sports, fashion, and leisure, usually in that order. Like adjacent stories on a newspaper's front page—with no transitions between articles—the individual sequences were held together only by their topicality and currency. Putatively an analogue of the newspaper, newsreel journals were destined, given the time needed to record, develop, duplicate, and distribute, to be less current than their paper counterpart. As Richard Abel has suggested, newsreel journals “were content to provide illustration to news events the public was already familiar with through newspaper coverage.”⁶² The newsreel journal's responsibility to the tasks expected from newspapers has significant consequences for the early uses of non-fiction film.

While early actualities privileged visual exploration, the newsreel journal's need to rehash familiar print stories curtailed the primacy of the visual and stabilized the presence of title cards in the motion picture, altering the balance between text and image in the process. The practice of titling motion pictures goes back to the earliest days of cinema when glass plates with the title of the next feature would be projected during the

⁶² Abel ed., *Encyclopedia of Early Film*, 686.

changing of the reel.⁶³ When multiple shot actualities appear around 1902 an alternating pattern of title and shot emerges, as in *Astrakhan Fish Factory*. But until the newsreel journal, the title card was not yet a stable presence, not necessarily part of the projected reel. In the years between 1904 and 1908, actuality exhibition oscillates between commentary provided by a lecturer and by intertitles.⁶⁴ The same film could be paired with text or a live voice, depending on the venue, availability of lecturer, accompanying program etc.

Though the lecturer and the lecture film never go away completely—still with us today in the television documentary format—the emergence of the newsreel journal correlates with an industry-wide shift from live verbal accompaniment towards the delivery of both verbal and visual content via a single source: the film itself.

In both actualities and newsreel journals, titles precede the image and identify the location, subject, or activity on display. The difference between actualities and newsreel journals is then one of degree. In imitation of newspaper captions, the intertitles in newsreel journals exhibited greater explanatory affect and bestowed greater epistemic prowess on the verbal component. Existing to complement print news, the newsreel journals adapted the newspaper's treatment of visual material as passive, illustrative components. Unlike stand-alone actualities that sought to capture and express the structure inherent in the reality captured (i.e. the logic of process), newsreel journals were more likely to structure the shots externally, using titles to dictate the order and progression of individual shots or sequences.

⁶³ Abel ed., *Encyclopedia of Early Film*, 38.

⁶⁴ Abel ed., *Encyclopedia of Early Film*, 471-476.

Often comprised of headings and sub-headings, newsreel titles linger in the mind of the viewer as a running commentary on the scene. Consider the following sequence from a British Pathé WWI –era journal:⁶⁵



The title reads: *PERVYSE STATION FORTIFIED. The smoke seen issuing from the ground, is from an underground kitchen.* A near 180-degree pan follows. The camera move begins on a fence with neither pipe nor smoke visible. Several seconds later, a pipe resembling an artillery barrel, enters the frame. The title card directs the viewer’s attention to a detail in the scene and usurps some of the camera’s ability to explore the scene in question. Such a pre-emptive gesture is typical of newsreel journals and is particularly common when a single title introduces a multiple-shot sequence. In such cases, the title is often broken up into several sections that correspond to the order of shots. As a point of contrast, in *Fish Factory in Astrakhan* a lengthy four shot sequence, showing four distinct stages of a process, is introduced with a single title: *Salting the Fish.*

With the newsreel journal, non-fiction motion pictures take an informational turn. What I mean by this is that documentary images increasingly become understood as fulfilling linguistic propositions and containing information. Not just visual data, but

⁶⁵Source: <http://www.britishpathe.com/record.php?id=79369>

propositional content like that found in a newspaper. At the level of the viewer response, the image's illustrative function invited the spectator to inscribe propositional content into the image. Communication scholars have labeled such a response as a rhetorical one, in distinction to an aesthetic response, which characterizes our encounters with fictional material. Sonja Foss, in particular, has argued that such a response may be the foundation of visual rhetoric as such. Though Foss strikes me as too absolute, the distinction she proposes is nonetheless instructive in articulating some ways in which documentary may distinguish itself as a medium from fiction film.

"An aesthetic response," according to Foss:

consists of a viewer's direct perceptual encounter with the sensory aspects of the artifact. Experience of a viewer's direct perceptual encounter with the sensory aspects of the artifact. Experience of a work at an aesthetic level might mean enjoying its color, sensing its form, or valuing its texture. There is no purpose governing the experience rather than simply having the experience. In a *rhetorical response*, in contrast, meaning is attributed to the artifact. Colors, lines, textures, and rhythms in an artifact provide a basis for the viewer to infer the existence of images, emotions, and ideas.⁶⁶

Most salient in the above description is Foss' emphasis on the way that perceived "colors, lines, textures, and rhythms" are transformed by the spectator's rhetorical response into propositional content regarding the "existence of images, emotions, and ideas." A *rhetorical response* introduces into the analysis of non-fiction film a communication theory framework, according to which the receiver is tasked with decoding the signal and then inscribing meaning into the original message. Such a framework requires the receiver to acknowledge being addressed by the material.

Newsreel journals did not openly address the viewer and preferred dry, informational captions instead of slogans and affective outcries—both staples of Soviet

⁶⁶ Foss, Sonja "Framing the Study of Visual Rhetoric: Toward a Transformation of Rhetorical Theory," in *Defining Visual Rhetorics* eds. Charles Hill and Marguerite Helmers (New York: Routledge, 2004), 306.

khronika to come. The shift towards more explicit direct address comes as an educational role becomes increasingly ascribed to non-fiction film. The writings of Grierson and Rotha suggest that documentary brought a sense of social responsibility to non-fiction film. But the belief that non-fiction should be informative, educational, and edifying was in place long before *Nanook of the North* or *Kino-Pravda*. In 1913, Thomas Edison famously pronounced:

Books will soon be obsolete in the schools. Scholars will soon be instructed through the eye. It is possible to teach every branch of human knowledge with the motion picture. Our school system will be completely changed in ten years.⁶⁷

Edison's pronouncement was not unorthodox for its time. Lev Roshal's survey of Russian film writing from *Cine-Fono* and *Cinematography Herald* for the years 1907-1914 reveals many similar predictions, as well as frequent calls for an enlightening and morally instructive non-fiction cinema that could counter the frivolous distractions of fiction.

The ability of non-fiction film to influence public discourse—a keystone of Grierson's definition of documentary—was likewise recognized before the 1920s. Arguing for the need to send cinematographers to the front during the First and Second Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913, one Russian author is unequivocal in his argument:

What can celebrate the glory of our soldiers more than the cinematograph? There is nothing better than documentary evidence to agitate Russia with news of an insult inflicted upon the Slavic people.⁶⁸

The above quote brings out a distinctive aspect of newsreel in Russia. Even before WWI and the Revolutions of 1917, newsreel was understood in Russia in an agitational and militaristic key. Part of this stems from the comparative advantage—over Pathé and other

⁶⁷ Abel ed., *Encyclopedia of Early Film*, 307.

⁶⁸ Roshal, *Начало всех начал*, 86.

Western competitors—enjoyed by domestic firms in producing such material.

Khanzhankov's firm was able to offer exclusive reporting from the Balkan War of 1913.⁶⁹ Similarly, the Skobelev company was given the exclusive right to film at the front following the outbreak of WWI, a right that was revoked soon after, following complaints from distributors over the limited amount and poor quality of the material produced.⁷⁰

While pre-Revolutionary newsreel in Russia did not exclude the lighter fare, the overwhelming emphasis was, as John MacKay puts it, on “military, aristocratic and imperial spectacle.”⁷¹

The pervasive presence of military and political content in newsreel only increased after the February revolution with the journal *A Free Russia* (*Свободная Россия*). Though only two of the thirteen issues of *A Free Russia* survive, the montage lists from the journals indicate that most issues focused on the representation of government and its role in public life. The second issue, released in April 1917, presents:

spectators with images and intertitle identifications of leaders of the new Provisional Government (I.G. Tsereteli, M.N. Skobelev, V.N. Chernov and so on); heads of the army (such as General Brusilov and Admiral Kolchak); gatherings of various committees and political groups (the Petrograd Executive Committee of Soviet Workers and Soldier Deputies); foreign dignitaries in Russia (representatives from the Italian consulate and various Italian socialists; British feminist Emmeline Pankhurst); and a few visually spectacular “news events” (a fire).⁷²

Visually, *A Free Russia* did not deviate from the norms set by Pathé except for its emphasis on political banners and slogans. The overdetermined presence of sloganeering is a natural by-product of how uneventful footage of political demonstrations tends to be. In this Russian footage of political rallies, one first observes newsreel sequences breaking

⁶⁹ Roshal, *Начало всех начал*, 53.

⁷⁰ Taylor, Richard *The Politics of Soviet cinema 1917-1928*, 12.

⁷¹ Mackay, John *Dziga Vertov: His Life and Work* (unpublished MS), 32.

⁷² RGALI f. 2057, op. 1, d. 261, l. 69 cited in MacKay, *Dziga Vertov*, 33.

with the unities of space and time and beginning to present something akin to an argument. For example, one surviving sequence in *A Free Russia* ends with three jump cuts on political banners: "*Forward with our leader, Kerensky! (Вперед за нашим вождем Керенским!!) Down with militarism! (Борьба с милитаризмом) Hurrah for the Russian Revolution (Да здравствует, Российская революция!)*"⁷³

One must be careful not to overemphasize the importance of a sequence such as this. At a basic level, the three consecutive banners are nothing but a camera operator making a protocol of observed events. Yet, at the same time, moments like this uncover new possibilities for editing. They signal the start of a process by which verbal and visual material is integrated into a unity. They differs from the typical newsreel journal and no longer treat verbal and visual elements as two separate channels: informational and illustrative. This text-image unity violated the divide between title and illustration that had been the norm in the newsreel journals up to then. The tendency to integrate visual and verbal information would distinguish Soviet *newsreel* in the years to come.

⁷³ RGAKDF(Russian National Archive of Kino and Photo Documents) Item#541.

v. Old records of a new era: the first Soviet newsreel journal.

Chronologically, the era of Soviet *khronika*, a period during which old newsreel formats and an entrenched mode of production are transformed, can be said to begin in March of 1917 with G. Boltianski's work on *A Free Russia* and end at the offices of Sovkino on January 4th, 1927 when, after a series of disputes with studio executive N. Trainin, Dziga Vertov is fired. I date the birth of Soviet *khronika* to several months before the actual Bolshevik Revolution in October because the forces that most influence the first five years of Soviet newsreel are already apparent in the aftermath of the February events.

In 1917, there was widespread recognition that *khronika* was the privileged record-keeper of a new historical era. In the wake of the February Revolution, this newfound historical significance was acknowledged almost immediately. Tracing the lineage of cinema's "social function" a 1918 article in the *Anarchy* periodical dates the *khronika*'s emergence as a record keeper for a new era to March of 1917:

cinema's "social" sector has existed since the start of the Revolution, starting with March of last year. The founder and director of this section is G. Boltianski. Since the beginning, the main work of this department has been the production of Revolutionary *khronika*. In accordance with the thoughts of the section's founder, all the most significant socio-political moments during the time of the Revolution have, despite all hardships, been systematically fixated on the film strip. This has been done in order to preserve for the future generations, the vivid and dramatic episodes from the history of the Revolution. These reels are cinema's great contribution to the history of great revolutions and will eventually be given over to the national film archive.⁷⁴

The understanding of newsreel as bearing special witness to a new historical era continues in the immediate aftermath of the Bolshevik overthrow. One of the first official documents issued by the new government's Military-Revolutionary committee of the

⁷⁴ "Анархия" 12 march, 1918.

Petrograd Soviet on November 5(18), 1917, was a special permit for cinematographer E. Modzelevski granting him “the right to filming in Petrograd and its vicinities for the purposes of fixating the most significant moments of the Revolution.”⁷⁵

Buttressing the concern for the preservation of significant "socio-political moments" was the assumption that *khronika* would be assembled into large historical narratives that synthesized the significant events underway. In the month following the February Revolution, all the footage shot by film companies and independent cinematographers was made into *The Great Days of Revolution in Moscow*, edited and directed by M. Bonch-Tomashevsky. On March 23rd(April 5) of 1917, the film was shown at the Moscow Soviet to a crowd of cinema and government workers.⁷⁶ Less than a week later, it was sold at an auction organized by the Union of Cinema workers and the MSRD film committee. By April 13th(26th), the film was showing at nine theatres across Moscow.⁷⁷

Immediately after *Great Days*, other compilation films followed, depicting the historical transitions underfoot. On the 19th of April (May 2nd), Biofilm released *The Full Overview of the Petrograd Revolution*. Another film—*Russia in the Days of the Great Revolution*—followed shortly thereafter.⁷⁸ Even though these films do not survive, their very existence points to the new government's drive to organize newsreel production for the purposes of recording and preserving the events underfoot. On the 22nd of March, the day before the screening first screening *Great Days*, the Moscow Municipal Council

⁷⁵ Vishnevski, Veniamin "Факты и даты из истории отечественной кинематографии (март 1917 – декабрь 1920," in *Из истории кино. Материалы и документы*. (Moscow: Goskinoizdat,1958), p. 51.

⁷⁶ *Сине-фоно*, 1917, № 11-12 in Vishnevski, "Факты и даты из истории отечественной кинематографии (март 1917 –декабрь 1920)," 64.

⁷⁷ Vishnevski, Veniamin *25 лет советского кино в хронологических датах* (Moscow: Goskinoizdat,1945), 33.

⁷⁸ Lebedev, N. A. *Очерки истории кино СССР Немое кино: 1918 – 1934 год* Accessed 08/12/2012 at <http://bibliotekar.ru/kino/4.htm>

issued a resolution about the need to combine all the footage of March 12th demonstration that had just taken place into a film called, *Freedom Holiday* (Праздник Свободы) and formed a committee on the propagandistic uses of this film at home and abroad.⁷⁹

The government's embrace of *khronika* only intensifies after the October revolution. According to John Reid's *10 Days That Shook The World*, at the conclusion of the 2nd meeting of the All-Russian Congress of Soviets, dozens of delegates were sent off with the following parting words from Lenin: "We must not lose any time... tomorrow morning all of Russia must know this news of colossal meaning."⁸⁰ That night, future Commissar of the Enlightenment and aspiring scriptwriter Anatoly Lunacharsky signed a mandate granting Grigori Boltianski and his cameraman Novizkiy the right to film sites of historical importance around St. Petersburg. Lunacharski himself made several suggestions: the Bolshevik headquarters at the Smolny Institute, the battleship Aurora docked on the Neva, the Winter palace.⁸¹ On the Commissar's advice, Novizkiy shot about 400 meters of footage. That footage would be compiled into *The October Overthrow*, *The Second Revolution* and would then, for several years, change shape and title, as the footage made its way across Soviet Russia.⁸²

Khronika's aesthetic of preservation co-existed with an informational focus, emboldened by political stress on the educational and agitational uses of cinema. Along with producing several of the compilation films mentioned above, the Skobelev firm prided itself on its commitment to "broad dissemination of scientific knowledge by way

⁷⁹ Vishnevski, "Факты и даты из истории отечественной кинематографии (март 1917 –декабрь 1920," 42.

⁸⁰ Reid, John *Ten Days that Shook the World*, (New York: Penguin,1977), 29.

⁸¹ Drobashenko, Sergei *История советского документального кино* (Moscow: Moscow University Press, 1980), 5.

⁸² Drobashenko, *История советского документального кино*, 7.

of the kino-lecture.”⁸³ The shooting for these kino-lectures was to be organized by the scientists who would eventually deliver the lectures alongside the footage. In addition, the Committee pledged to release a series of “kino-albums.” These film portrait galleries featured 8-10 portraits of political and social leaders, esteemed scientists, as well as renowned artists. These portraits were to be shown first as part of newsreel journals before being handed over to the Academy of Science archive.

The Cine-Committee's pairing of newsreel and educational films brought together two separate pursuits. First, the preservation of distinct, historically valuable moments. Second, on display in kino-lectures and science films, was a more outwardly rhetorical and verbally-steered use of images. Reflecting on these two pursuits in relation to the history of documentary film, one readily notices that the two line up with the two extremes of documentary practice. On the one hand, observational filmmaking, resisting match cuts and many other elements of film language, in order to present records of lived experience. On the other, the voice-over heavy, argument-driven films, exemplifying what we now refer to as a "TV-documentary." The majority of documentary productions today rests between these two poles.

The story of Soviet newsreel is the search for a union between the pedagogical ends of the science film and *khronika's* preservationist aesthetic. The search can be said to culminate with Dziga Vertov's newsreel journal *Kino-Pravda* (1922-1925), which paved the way for this union and pushed newsreel in the direction of the feature-length documentary. But in 1918, Soviet newsreel's decentralized mode of production and its allegiance to an aesthetic of the view had to be overturned first.

⁸³ Vishnevski, *25 лет советского кино в хронологических датах*, 4. Russian text: "широкое распространение научных знаний в народе путем кино-лекций."

The Skobelev Cine-Committee did not last long into 1918. After several political missteps, including the filming of a bourgeois protest in November 1917 and the release of several purportedly anti-Soviet, i.e. anti-Bolshevik, films such as Boltianski's *Towards a People's Government* (К Народной Власти), the Skobelev Cine-Committee was liquidated, its assets nationalized and handed over to a new organization, the Moscow Cine-Committee.⁸⁴ Preserving the organizational structure already in place, the Moscow Cine-Committee issued a resolution on April 25th establishing two branches: science and *khronika*. The Cine-Committee's first film *Proletarian Holiday in Moscow* was filmed six days later, on May 1st, 1918 and shown in six Moscow theatres later that very night.⁸⁵

A month later, the Cine-Committee released the first issue of *Kino-Nedelia*, Soviet Russia's first newsreel journal. Politically, the journal made the new government visible to its people, highlighted the stabilization efforts underway, and offered updates on the latest military advances. To get a sense of the journal's content consider *Kino-Nedelia*#33 – an issue believed to be relatively intact.⁸⁶

The issue begins with: *MOSCOW. The official funeral of the heroes KIKIVIDZE and VEDERNIKOV*. The title is followed by a three shot sequence of a funeral procession. True to the journal template, titles precede images and resemble newspaper captions. All of the shots are wide. Next story: *An estate has been converted into a people's museum*. The title is illustrated by an elegant eight shot sequence, with two panorama pans as bookends. The next two stories focus on the government's response to

⁸⁴ Lebedev, *Очерки истории кино СССР Немое кино: 1918 – 1934 год*. Accessed 08/12/12 at <http://bibliotekar.ru/kino/5.htm>

⁸⁵ "Правда" 1918, № 86, 3 May.

⁸⁶ Many issues of *Kino-Nedelia* were destroyed by Vertov himself who cut sequences out of them for use in his own compilation film *The Anniversary of the Revolution*. He then attempted to reconstruct some of them in 1919. For more on this see Tsivian, *Lines of Resistance*, 403.

a snowstorm. *MOSCOW. In accordance with official decree Muscovites clean the streets and sidewalks.* A single shot of Muscovites cleaning the street follows. The second snow-related story is introduced with a title about the adverse effects of snowdrifts on military advances. A multiple shot sequence showing the removal of snow from train tracks comes thereafter. The snow removal story culminates in the locomotive running on the cleared-off track, making a proto-narrative sequence that notably allows the visuals to develop beyond the domain circumscribed by the title.

"*Kino-Nedelia* differed from other newsreel only in that its titles were Soviet. The content was the same: the same parades and funerals."⁸⁷ This was the assessment of Dziga Vertov, the man in charge of production for most of *Kino-Nedelia's* 43 issues (1918-1919). Given the ongoing Civil War and collapse of the national economy, it is not surprising that *Kino-Nedelia* was barely mentioned in the press of the time. The few mentions of the journals I've been able to find consist of little more than a list of the events captured and, on occasion, an outcry bemoaning the journal's inadequate distribution.

In the same vein as Vertov's assessment of *Kino-Nedelia* above, was G. Boltianski's opinion of the journal. Despite Boltianski's political misstep during his time with the Skobelev Committee, he remained in charge of *khronika* production in Petrograd. Boltianski summarized *Kino-Nedelia* as follows:

Much in it stemmed from the traditions of old *khronika*: characterized by a protocol-like, passionless, external, and totally official depiction of Revolutionary events. At times, it seemed to be chasing bourgeois sensationalism, using the techniques from Pathé. Occasionally, *Kino-Nedelia* showed sequences that had no place in Soviet *khronika*.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Roshal, Lev *Дзига Вертов* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1982), 72.

⁸⁸ Roshal, *Дзига Вертов*, 72.

Much like the cinematographer Alexander Lemberg, Boltianski describes the visual aesthetic of newsreel journals as a protocol. Though the aspiration may have been there, there was little Vertov could do to differentiate *Kino-Nedelia* from its predecessors. An entrenched mode of production, the persistence of old viewing habits, and, most importantly, a lack of resources all stood in his way.⁸⁹

The first issue of *Kino-Nedelia* came out four days after Vertov, at the invitation of the influential Soviet journalist Mikhail Koltsov, began working as a secretary of the *khronika* division at the Moscow Cine-Committee. Along with administrative work, Vertov worked on titling the material, and by the end of 1918, he was more or less in charge of *Kino-Nedelia*.⁹⁰ But being “in charge”, though impressive for a 22 year old, is not quite as impressive as it sounds. Like previous “authors” of newsreel journals and compilation films—G. Boltianski, V. Gardin, N. Tikhonov, and M. Shneiderov among them—Vertov had little to no control over how material was filmed. Camera operators, many of whom had worked for pre-Revolutionary newsreel journals, continued to cover events as they had before, making a protocol of an event and giving little thought to how and for what purpose the material would be used. *Kino-Nedelia* is thus primarily the work of cinematographers: P. Novizki, P. Ermolov, A. Levitski, G. Giber, M. Naletni, A. Lemberg, E. Tisse, S. Saboslaev, A. Vinkler and others. Along with his administrative duties, Vertov’s role in *Kino-Nedelia* was largely that of an annotator—receiving scenes brought back by cinematographers and writing titles, usually based on notes provided by the shooters.⁹¹

⁸⁹ Drobashenko, Sergei, *История Советского Документального Кино*, 32.

⁹⁰ Tsivian, *Lines of Resistance*, 403.

⁹¹ Newsreel cinematographers were expected to keep a detailed log of the material filmed to be relied on in the writing of title.

Production jobs in early film, like in most industries of the time, were divided by gender. Camera operators were exclusively male. In cinema journals and newspapers, they were celebrated as the rugged adventurers of the film world and depicted in photo-collages showing their exotic travels. Editing, with its purported similarity with sewing, was reserved for females, as evidenced by the photo-layout below.⁹²

МОНТАЖИЦА

ЗА ГРАНИЦАМИ, женщины, работающие на кинофабрике — делают работу, у нас же это совершают только мужчины.

Вспомогательная киноинженерия была только рассчитана руками женщинами и первая редакция «Путь» занималась склейкой и монтажом на кинофабрике. В настоящее время в Москве и в Ленинграде работают женщины-ремонтники.

Принято считать, что роль женщины в кино ограничивается только «чистой» работой в монтажной комнате, тогда как мужчины, по-прежнему несут аппаратную и т. д. Редакция считает, что так, на начальной стадии, женщины выдвинули вперед мужскую работу по выносу, склеиванию и монтажу картин.

В особенности важна работа монтажниц в монтажной комнате, тогда как мужчины выполняют работу по монтажу, склеиванию и монтажу картин.

В особенности важна работа монтажниц в монтажной комнате, тогда как мужчины выполняют работу по монтажу, склеиванию и монтажу картин.

Итак, женщины-киноинженеры-ремонтники. Они приходят на кинофабрику с громадным оборудованием и с огромным количеством утюгов. Но мужчины еще не привыкли к сложному оборудованию на кинофабрике и на первых порах и женщинами отнеслись к этому с недоверием и осторожностью.

У нас есть несколько работниц, которые прекрасно разбираются в аппаратуре, знают монтаж, умеют их подобрать, но женщины в монтажной комнате — делают основную работу, и мы боимся поручить им серьезную работу, поэтому это отношение было на фабрике.

И не в таком, ни в чем не основанного различия женщины-ремонтники и женщины-монтажницы, талантливый ремонтник по целым годам держит «аппарат» работы. Но женщина, даже лучше мужского, может работать и в монтажной комнате. Она ценнейшая и важнейшая для всех работников кинофабрики — операторница — «буквально» раньше женщины и там была основной работой. Теперь — та работа, которую женщины и все работники кинофабрики делают на себе.

Забываются женщины-ремонтники. В среднем рублей сто и меньше. Но женщины не могут — потому что женщины работают, потому что женщины работают, потому что женщины работают, потому что женщины работают, потому что женщины работают.

А. С. Сивова

Верху — кадры из картин и междукадровый монтаж — для склейки. Внизу — женщины фото-лаборатории (фото-лаборатория).

As with camera operators, one should not assume any directorial power in Vertov's relationship with the female editors at the Cine-Committee. This is best illustrated by Elizaveta Svilova's anecdote about Vertov's lost film *The Battle of Tsaritsyn* (1919), apparently his first experimental work. Svilova, Vertov's wife and creative partner, recalls Dziga pouting after the editor girls ignored his instructions to insert shots 2 or 3 frames long into the film's edit. Assuming, that Vertov had made a mistake, the editors threw the little montage bits into the garbage bin.⁹³

⁹² Image: *Soviet Screen*, March, 1926.
⁹³ Svilova-Vertova ed., *Дзига Вертов в воспоминаниях*, 31.

Old habits at the level of production were inseparable from the defaults with which spectators viewed non-fiction film. The "view aesthetic" persists in *Kino-Nedelia* and the slightest deviations from it are handled with extreme caution. For an example of such a deviation, consider the third sequence in *Kino-Nedelia#18* (1 October, 1918). The story begins with the title: *The Moscow Zoo is open to the public. The entrance is free.* A wide exterior shot shows a crowd waiting to enter the zoo. The next title reads: *Near the animals.* A close-up of a bull looking into the camera follows. It is followed by a wider shot of visitors inspecting the bull.

The need to preface a shift in optical perspective with a title is revealing. Notwithstanding the irregularity of placing a close-up before an establishing shot, one expects the shot of the bull to be prefaced with an identification such as *Boria, a prized bull from Kostroma* or, at the very least, simply: *Bull*. The unexpected jump in shot scale, something that fiction film viewers took for granted by 1918, was in the context of newsreel still something that required forewarning. To avoid the risk of confusing viewers unaccustomed to such leaps in perspective, Vertov warns his viewers that they're about to be *near the animals*.

Deeply ingrained modes of production and viewing habits ensured that the requisite shifts in production came gradually and often stubbornly. Making the persistence of pre-existing aesthetic norms even more inevitable, *Kino-Nedelia* was produced during the two years that film stock was virtually absent from the country. By November 1918, it was declared that the film stock supplies in the country would last two months. By 1921, receiving a hundred meters of film stock required Lenin's personal

hand written permission. Electricity needed to project film was likewise in short supply, even in major cities.⁹⁴

With no native film stock manufacturing, the only way to acquire film stock was to buy it abroad and pay for it with gold currency. Amidst economic collapse, it comes as no surprise that other desperately needed items took precedence over film stock.

Consequently, active filmmaking was little practiced between 1919 and 1922. Issues of *Kino-Nedelia*, Soviet Russia's only newsreel journal, were printed in runs of 10-15 copies, a woefully inadequate amount for a country of 150 million.

On June 27, 1919, *Kino-Nedelia* ended its run after 43 issues. The reality of the Civil War made regular production and exhibition impossible.⁹⁵ Between 1919 and 1921, Vertov travelled with the *October Revolution Agitational Train* and the *Red Star Agit Steamer*. Both trips became the subjects of travelogue films, though the former is not known to have survived. As he made his way through territories recently secured by the Red Army, Vertov worked as programmer and film presenter, promoting the new government. Vertov himself described those years as time spent researching the new film audience.

Between *Kino-Nedelia* and the first issue of *Kino-Pravda* on May 21, 1922 there was no regular newsreel journal in the Soviet Union. During this time, in addition to traveling, Vertov oversaw the re-editing of longer compilation films, which presented overviews of significant historical events (*The Anniversary of the Revolution*, *The History*

⁹⁴ For more on the material shortages of the Soviet film industry until 1923 see: Youngblood, Denise *Soviet Cinema in the Silent Era*, (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1991), 1-5; 39-47.

⁹⁵ Roshal, *Dziga Vertov*, 28.

of *The Civil War*, *The Trial of Mironov*, and several others).⁹⁶ With the purported exception of the lost *Battle of Tsaritsyn*, the longer pre-1922 films do not differ visually from *Kino-Nedelia*. Judging by the surviving fragments, the most noticeable difference between them is the presence of more verbose intertitles, used in the longer compilations to provide analysis and an overarching interpretive framework.

The scarcity of film stock all but ensured that initial departures beyond the conventions of early non-fiction first occurred at the level of intertitles. Vertov himself implies as much with his remark that *Kino-Nedelia*'s only difference from old newsreel was that “its intertitles were Soviet.” On the surface, this suggests that while presenting Soviet information, *Kino-Nedelia* relied on the same basic relationship between title and image as other newsreel journals and followed the format of what Vertov called “newspaper newsreel.”⁹⁷ There is a bit more to it than that. The pressure to deliver distinctly Soviet *khronika* amidst scarce resource and an entrenched mode pushed *khronika* in the direction of the lecture-film.

⁹⁶ For a full Vertov filmography, compiled by Aleksandr Deriabin, see Tsivian, ed., *Lines of Resistance*, 403-409.

⁹⁷ Drobashenko, *История советского документального кино*, 73.

vi. For peat's sake: kino-lectures and other film propaganda.

Lenin's famous statement that “the production of new films imbued with Communist ideas and reflecting Soviet reality should start with *khronika*” gave much needed ammunition to newsreel workers at a time when they needed it most.

In his first conversation about cinema with Anatoli Lunacharski, Lenin demanded:

Wide-ranging *khronika*, appropriately selected, in a way that publicizes an issue in the same manner as our best soviet newspapers. Cinema, according to Vladimir Il'ich, must assume the character of a public lecture on various questions of science and technology.⁹⁸

Lenin's understanding of *khronika* brought together the aesthetics of newsreel journal with the need to publicize information using the methods of the kino-lecture.⁹⁹ Unlike Stalin, a cinephile who watched a movie every night, Lenin, by all estimates, was not much of a film buff. This comes across in his statements about cinema. Most of them—beginning with statements made in Finland during the Summer of 1917—focus on film's scientific and agitational purposes and tend towards the abstract and general.¹⁰⁰ (Stalin differs completely in this regard as well; his most famous complaint, made in person to Eisenstein and actor Nikolai Cherkasov, was that Ivan the Terrible's beard was a bit too long, and that the tsar's kiss to his wife was, likewise, also a tad long).

Many will read Lenin's emphasis on "publicizing an issue" to imply a propagandistic use of images. Today, the word *propaganda* is chiefly a derogatory term, used to describe misleading information that is biased.¹⁰¹ In the early Soviet era, an important distinction existed between *agitation* and *propaganda*. First described by the Marxist theorist Gyorgi Plekhanov and consequently cited by Lenin in *What is to Be*

⁹⁸ Cited in Drobashenko, *История Советского Документального Кино*, 4.

⁹⁹ Boltianski, Grigori *Ленин и кино* (Moscow: Госкиноиздат, 1925), 16-19.

¹⁰⁰ "Советское кино" № 1-2 (1933): 6-7.

¹⁰¹ The exclusively negative use of the word is unfortunate as it has made us myopic to the propagandistic tendencies within material we do not consider to be ideologically suspect.

Done, *agitation* and *propaganda* were understood as distinct strategies. As we shall see, the two aligned with two distinct modes of non-fiction film. For Plekhanov the difference between the two strategies was that:

A propagandist presents many ideas to one or a few persons; an agitator presents only one or a few ideas, but presents them to a mass of people.¹⁰²

Whereas *propaganda* describes a general educational strategy to be pursued at all times, *agitation* is much closer to our modern understanding of *propaganda* as inherently manipulative. *Agitation* back then, as *propaganda* is now, was understood as a political tool needed to attain mass influence.¹⁰³ *Agitation* was:

indispensable to every party that wishes to have political significance. A sect may be content with propaganda in the narrow sense of the word. A political party – never.¹⁰⁴

As a strategy, *agitation* was streamlined, rhetorically direct. It promoted a single idea and cultivated a mass response. Unlike *propaganda*, *agitation* was not much concerned with elucidating the causes of a phenomenon. *Agitation* promoted solutions or clearly pointed the finger at a culprit. *Propaganda* was more in-depth and shaped the recipient's way of thinking. Lenin explains this in *What is to be Done*:

The propagandist, dealing with, say, the question of unemployment, must explain the capitalistic nature of crises, the cause of their inevitability in modern society, the necessity for the transformation of this society into a socialist society, etc. In a word, he must present “many ideas”, so many indeed, that they will be understood as an integral whole by a (comparatively) few persons. The agitator however, speaking on the same subject, will take as an illustration the death of an unemployed worker’s family from starvation, the growing impoverishment etc. and utilizing this fact, known to all, will direct his efforts to presenting a *single idea* to the “masses.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Quoted in V.I. Lenin *Collected Works. Vol. 5.* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1961), 409.

¹⁰³ For more on the origins of Plekhanov’s thoughts on agitation starting with his 1894 pamphlet *О6 Агитации* (On Agitation) see Baron, Samuel *Plekhanov: the father of Russian Marxism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1963), 149-153.

¹⁰⁴ Baron, *Plekhanov*, 151.

¹⁰⁵ Lenin, V.I. *What is to be Done* (New York: International Publishers, 1969), 66.

Given the political necessity of agitation campaigns, *agitation films* (*agit-films* or *agitki*) were some of the only films produced during the Civil War period. Of the ninety two films produced by the Soviet film industry between 1918-1920, sixty three of them were *agitki*, most of them being shorter than half an hour in length.¹⁰⁶

Agit-films were shown both in theatres and via the agit-train distribution network. Due to the sensitivity of nitrate film stock, no *agit-films* from this period are known to survive. Nonetheless, we do know that many *agitki* were based on popular posters and combined staged scenes with *khronika*. The agit-films produced between 1918-1921 reveal an impressive range of subject matter:

Agit-films called on the populace to lay down their arms (*The Last Bullet*), to collect warm clothing for the front (*Everything to the Front!*), battle domestic disarray (*Fix the Trains*; *Sow the Seeds*). They called on people to fight for peace (*Fight War with War*), promoted the international solidarity of workers (*Towards the Bright Kingdom of the Third International*), encouraged the unity of science and labor (*Thickening*). Along with the political and military films, anti-religious films were also produced (*The Tale of Pope Pancratius*; *Spiders and Flies*), as well as films about the fight against starvation (*Hunger...hunger...hunger*), films promoting health and hygiene (*The Asian Guest* about tuberculosis; *The Victims of Basements* – about the fight against tuberculosis; *Children – Life's Flowers* about the need to promote reproductive health.¹⁰⁷

Scholars, such as Richard Taylor, have suggested that "the essence of economy and dynamism" in the *agitka*'s visual presentation of material became a precursor to the "dynamic montage" theorized by Eisenstein. The *agit-film* left the task of *propaganda* to be filled in by another branch of film production. Though *khronika* was occasionally referred to as "agitation with facts" (агитация фактами), the existence of separate *agit-films*, inadvertently pushed *khronika* in the direction *propaganda*, adorning it with the responsibility to explore the causes of social and political phenomena.

The expectation that propaganda should reveal the underlying causal structure of an event lent itself to the production of compilation films that synthesized footage of

¹⁰⁶ Taylor, *The Politics of Soviet Cinema*, 56.

¹⁰⁷ Lebedev, *Очерки истории кино СССР Немое кино: 1918 – 1934 год*. Accessed 08/12/12 at <http://bibliotekar.ru/kino/9.htm>

significant events to commemorate historical landmarks. Newsreel compilation films began to be made as early as the Dreyfus affair (1895) but in the aftermath of the October Revolution, the need to interpret the transpiring events in a Bolshevik key pushed the historical compilation in a propagandistic direction.¹⁰⁸

Given the unavailability of new footage, filmmakers tended to the requirements of propaganda by adding excessive text. This is apparent in the surviving fragments of Vertov's first long-form film, the 12-reel *Anniversary of the Revolution*. Released in October of 1918 and shown at Moscow's open-air plazas, the film's first several minutes demonstrate a change in the text's relationship to the image. The title cards no longer function as captions. Instead, they deliver information that is not visualizable. The text retains only the most tangential connection with the picture. The film's opening few minutes proceed as follows:

Title 1: *Slavery, three years of war, and food shortages during 1917 have caused people's worries to take on a more ...*

Title 2: *... grave character. The government, ruling with force [lit. by a bridle], together with the perverted powers, couldn't contain the masses. On the 25th of February, the protests in Petrograd intensified, and the people took to the streets.*

Shot 1: A crowd on the street in St. Petersburg.

Title 3: *The Duma was desperately trying to prevent the events underway. Rodsianko sent a telegraph to the tsar*

Title 4: *The situation is worsening. Something has to be done immediately. Tomorrow will be too late. The future of our homeland and our dynasty is at stake.*

Title 5: *But ... the wreath bearer was silent ... The troops began to switch over to the side of the people. Volyn's and Pavlov's troops declared themselves as on the side of freedom.*

Shot 2: Troops marching.

¹⁰⁸ For more information on the earliest compilation films see Leyda, *Jay Films Beget Films*, Ch.1.

Title 6: *At the gates of the staff command building a crowd had gathered. The people were convincing the soldiers to stand up on the side of freedom.*

Shot 3: A demonstration.

Title 7: *First blood was spilled on Znamenskaya plaza*

Shot 4: People on Znamenskaya Plaza looking at the camera.

Given the abundance of text, one is tempted to say that *The Anniversary* shifts from its actuality sources and comes to resemble an illustrated lecture more than a film proper. Compared with *Kino-Nedelia*, the connection between image and title in the *Anniversary* is a great deal looser. In most early non-fiction, the relationship between text and image is that of a closed circuit; the text captions or annotates the image and the image illustrates the text. As we've seen, the degree of annotation varied slightly across actualities, industrials, and newsreel journals. In *The Anniversary* the circuit between the text and image is effectively broken. The images proceed as a parallel channel, maintaining some dialogue with the text but largely unattached.

A weakened connection between text and image suited the goals of *propaganda*. No longer needing to stick closely to the visual event recorded made it possible to include historical, socio-economic, and other causal factors into the film's intertitles. In other words, disconnect between text and image opened up the space for greater verbal abstraction. This came with one substantial drawback. The increase of verbal information left the visual material as dead weight. Although the spectator assumes the visual material to be a synecdoche for the verbal, there remains a sense that the image, while bearing some relation to the text, is fundamentally unable to express it.

Such an imbalance between verbal and visual will become a staple of voice-of-God of documentaries that begin to appear around 1930. In his *Theory of Film*, Siegfried Kracauer touches on the nature of the imbalance that textual excess enacts:

Not only does the sheer impact of the commentator's oratory automatically smother all communications [that the shots] might be able to make on their own, but his statement involves subjects and ideas which elude pictorial representation. Accordingly, the scattered tank and soldier columns in the snow are not even illustrations; they do not, and indeed, cannot illustrate the two thousand mile battlefront of the titanic struggle.¹⁰⁹

For Kracauer, it is not the redundancy of the verbal content that is problematic. More detrimental to the film as a whole is the passivity imposed on the visual material by the verbal dominance. The use of text that eludes pictorial representation transforms the visual into, what Kracauer calls, "stopgaps," which make certain types of documentaries guilty of a "concomitant indifference to the visuals."¹¹⁰

Four years after the release of *The Anniversary*, Dziga Vertov described the malignant effect of intertitles in a similar way. Following the same logical arc as Kracauer, Vertov moved from verbal excess to the consequent pernicious effects on visual expressivity. He begins by describing the redundancy at work between verbal and visual elements: "A psychological, detective, satirical, or any other picture. Cut out all scenes and just leave titles. We will get a literary skeleton of the picture."¹¹¹ Continuing, Vertov unpacks the implications that such redundancy has for the film's visual expressivity:

To this literary skeleton we can add new footage – realistic, symbolic, expressionist – any kind. Things are not changed. Neither is the interrelationship: literary skeleton plus cinematic illustration.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ Kracauer, Siegfried *Theory of Film* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 210.

¹¹⁰ Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, 210.

¹¹¹ Vertov, *Kino-Eye*, 11.

¹¹² Vertov, *Kino-Eye*, 11.

Vertov pairs his hypothetical (a film stripped to a literary skeleton) with various visual registers (realist, expressionist etc.). Citing these different registers, Vertov implies that a certain mode of titling tethers the image and makes it incapable of expression beyond the title's mode or affect, regardless of the image's unique properties. Such images are not able to move the idea forward and can, at best, fold back into the intertitle, illustrating the material passively, in a way akin to the kino-lecture.

Notwithstanding the film's verbosity, *The Anniversary* was not a kino-lecture but a hybrid of *newsreel* and illustrated lecture. The film is believed to have presented a strict chronology of events.¹¹³ Moreover, early non-fiction conventions such as the portrait gallery with which the film ends—shown independently under the title *The Brain of Soviet Russia*—are present in the film. Most obviously, *The Anniversary's* progression was determined by the rate of projection and not by the lecturer as was often the case with kino-lectures.

Speaking more broadly, historical compilation films such as *The Anniversary* do not replace *kino-lectures*; the latter continue to be produced during the first half of the 1920s and in greater numbers than ever before. Starting in 1918, the use of agitational kino-lectures was widely discussed as a way of reclaiming Soviet film audiences, steering them from foreign product and reclaiming market share. "Market share" may sound ironic when describing the Soviet Union, but as we shall continue to see the profitability and commercial viability of non-fiction film was discussed extensively during the decade under review. Educational and financial gains were not yet understood as mutually exclusive.

¹¹³ Even though only pieces of *The Anniversary* survive, V. Listov's reconstruction suggests that the film presented a strict chronology of events. For more on this, see Roshal, *Dziga Vertov*.

[Lenin and SOVNARKOM director Vladimir Bonch-Bruyevich on the Red Square. Many of Lenin's first conversations about the importance of *khronika* were with Bonch-Bruyevich. Framegrab from *The Brain of Soviet Russia* (1919)]



Meeting with D. Leshenko, the head of VFKO (All-Russian Photo-Kino-Division) in the summer of 1920, Lenin insisted that film and lecture pairings be used to educate by example and demonstrate to Soviet workers the way agricultural and industrial work was carried out in Europe and America.¹¹⁴ This idea was given a substantial push when *How to Make Use of Our Treasures* (*Как надо уметь использовать свое богатство*) was presented—together with a lecture—to government officials at the Kremlin in October of the same year.¹¹⁵ The film showed the advantages of hydraulic peat extraction over the use of agricultural machines and was made-up of four parts:

- 1) What is peat and how is it extracted?
- 2) Extraction Technology
- 3) The benefits of peat and its conversion to electrical energy
- 4) The construction of regional extraction stations by the Soviet government.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ "Петроградская правда," № 199, September 8, 1920.

¹¹⁵ Vishnevski, *25 лет советского кино в хронологических датах*, 12.

¹¹⁶ Lebedev, *Очерки истории кино СССР Немое кино: 1918 – 1934 год*, Accessed 08/12/12 at <http://bibliotekar.ru/kino/8.htm>

According to historian Nikolai Lebedev, *Treasures* represents the first fully formed example of “industrial propaganda” as well as the first instance of motion pictures being used as part of a report made to the highest ranks of government.¹¹⁷

Lenin was taken with the film-lecture on peat. “Cinema in the service of technology is a great thing,” he pronounced.¹¹⁸ Lenin did not believe, however, that non-fiction cinema was self-sufficient in the delivery of information. In January of 1921, Lenin instructed the executive branch of the CPC (The Council of People's Commissars) that the exhibition of the film must be accompanied by engaging explanations and lectures. In April, Lenin wrote a letter to Commissar of Enlightenment Lunacharsky ordering the VFKO to produce 12(!) films propagating hydraulic peat extraction. Lenin's specific order remained unfulfilled due to stock shortages.¹¹⁹

Given the material scarcity plaguing the film industry, many of the early discussions about the social function of kino-lectures and film propaganda remained just talk. Nonetheless, these discussions put in place a paradigm for thinking about film propaganda, a paradigm that persisted when production resumed. When film stock begins to be manufactured domestically in 1923, lecture films are made in increasing numbers and play a key role in Sovkino's strategy for rejuvenating the domestic film market. Giving up the earlier idea of replacing the foreign films, shown at commercial theatres, with kino-lectures, the new strategy promoted worker cinema-clubs in order to break the exhibition monopoly held by commercial theatres. By 1925, the new strategy seemed to be working: “At the start of 1924 there were 227 commercial theaters in

¹¹⁷ Lebedev, *Очерки истории кино СССР Немое кино: 1918 – 1934 год*, Accessed 08/12/12 at <http://bibliotekar.ru/kino/8.htm>

¹¹⁸ Lenin, Vladimir *Самое важное из всех искусств: Ленин о кино*. (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1963), 152.

¹¹⁹ Lenin, *Самое важное из всех искусств*, 152.

Moscow. By the end of the year, only 153 remained. Yet, there was an additional 514 cine-club projectors installed.”¹²⁰

The kino-lecture format was a training ground for audiences not yet sufficiently literate both with respect to text as well as to cinema's visual grammar. Writing in 1925, N. Kudriavzev suggested that the rising popularity of the kino-lecture resulted from audiences not yet ready for the scientific films:

Scientific films are not accessible for a wide audience. Not to mention the fact, that in a large audience, a significant percentage will be less-than literate. Thus, it is important to remember, that an inadequately prepared audience will have difficulty with explanatory intertitles. For such an audience, the spoken word is more accessible, when it accompanies appropriate illustrations.¹²¹

Kudriavzev goes on to describe an audit of sorts. Conducted by the kino-lecture division of the Leningrad Council, this analysis of 16 kino-lectures, held in Leningrad’s most popular worker clubs, was meant to provide a rough overview of the industry

By introducing overarching analytical frameworks, kino-lectures were a precursor of a larger trend in non-fiction film. Like the newsreel journal, kino-lectures were a hybrid medium, and only partially a filmic one. The Leningrad Council’s audit makes clear that the duration of the performance was usually controlled by the lecturer and not by the speed of projection. Lecturers were advised to speak to the projectionist beforehand and decide on the proper projection speed and on the necessary signals to start and stop the projector whenever needed. Reporting on its findings, the committee stressed that given the shortage of available footage, the lecturer should alternate between filmed material and photographic slides.¹²² Such an approach was described as “sound”

¹²⁰ Kudriavzev, N., "Кино-лекция" in *APK* Issue 3 (1927), 7.

¹²¹ Kudriavzev, N., "Кино-лекция," 7.

¹²² Kudriavzev, N., "Кино-лекция," 7.

methodically but was often difficult to execute given the equipment limitations at many of the worker clubs.

Kudriavzev's summary of this report makes clear that the kino-lecturer was expected to be both a propagandizer of content and a researcher who gathered data on the Soviet spectator's ability to receive motion pictures informationally:

After the lecture, a discussion ensues. During the course of this discussion, the audience always reveals their feelings about the film. In this sense, the work of the kino-lecturer is tremendously important for film production in general. The kino-lecturer must be the direct link between the film producers on the one hand and the mass consumer on the other.¹²³

In this way, kino-lectures worked to supplement an industry still incapable of fulfilling the task of propaganda and rendering complex issues comprehensible using the language of film.

Drawing his final conclusions, Kudriavzev notes "that the act of re-editing old science films becomes very important as it is assigned very particular tasks."¹²⁴ These "particular tasks" were, one surmises, those of representing beyond the specific moment recorded, conveying ideas such as the abstract benefits of peat. This emphasis on re-editing during a period of material scarcity exerts a larger influence on Soviet film culture to come. The increased production of kino-lectures made the work of editors that of selecting pre-existing images from a limited set and using them to approximate pre-existing text. In such a production model, the role assigned to editing and post-production is overdetermined and would remain so during the first five years of the Soviet film industry. Meanwhile, production—the actual capture of material on film stock—went into hibernation. It is no great inferential leap to observe that an industry whose main

¹²³ Kudriavzev, N., "Кино-лекция," 7.

¹²⁴ Kudriavzev, N., "Кино-лекция," 7. Russian: "перемонтаж имеющихся научных лент приобретает особо важное и получает определенные задания."

activity is re-editing was fertile ground for the emergence of montage filmmaking. Tellingly, Sergei Eisenstein, the filmmaker most responsible for developing the theoretical foundations of Soviet montage, first became fascinated with the possibilities of editing while looking over the shoulder of future documentarian Esfir Shub, as she was re-cutting German films for the domestic market.¹²⁵

The increase in kino-lecture production and exhibition during this time offers empirical evidence of the extent to which the professional corps was involved in re-editing. Without new footage coming in, many filmmakers came to see editing as a creative rather than technical act, one that constantly engaged with the question of what *khronika* could and could not express. The kino-lecture editor learned his craft by focusing on the ways that individual images represent abstract concepts and themes. This approach to editing is fundamentally different than that of a fiction film editor who is guided by the priorities of spatial continuity, narrative efficiency, and a shooting script.

More importantly, the work of Soviet editors differed from the work of non-fiction editors employed when film stock is available and a visual complement to the text card is easily filmed. Unlike their counterparts in the US and Western Europe, the Soviet re-editors constantly confronted the semantic flexibility of visual material, the range of each shot's possible meanings. The focus on approximating pre-written verbal content made the editor conceive of shot transitions in thematic terms. Positioned as a site of meaning making, the cut became a point at which the film moved from one proposition to another, transferring from one verbal statement to another. Looking ahead, this may

¹²⁵ For more on this practice see Tsivian, Yuri "The Wise and Wicked Game" in *Film History* Vol.8, No. 3 (1996), 327-343.

explain why Soviet newsreel pre-dates non-fiction filmmaking elsewhere in breaking with a fixed vantage point, spatial coherence, and a fixed chronological sequence.

In the previous sections, I have discussed several early non-fiction formats: the actuality, the newsreel journal, the historical compilation, the kino-lecture. While I have avoided the question of whether any of them should be considered documentaries proper, I have tried to complicate the notion that these films can be glibly dismissed as "dim records." The formal incipience of these films is beyond doubt but it should nonetheless also be apparent that by isolating details, annotating events, and drawing attention to salient aspects of the image, titles and lecturers made newsreel and non-fiction film an interpretive medium.

This conclusion complicates documentary's foundational story, which claims that newsreel lacked the power to interpret, lacked thought. While the interpretive aspects of newsreel journal and kino-lectures do not outright invalidate the hypothesis regarding documentary's emergence, they do recommend a closer look at the suppositions underlying the *two claims hypothesis*. Even if one agrees with the claim that documentaries, unlike their predecessors, interpret their source material, equating documentary's emergence with the ability to make two claims—one indexical, one analytical—requires greater conceptual elaboration. One must take up in earnest the question of how documentary's representational capacities differed from those on display in early non-fiction formats. It is a question that requires serious consideration of what it means for a documentary image to bear a proposition. If faith in the unvarnished image, as Phil Rosen puts it, was not there even for Lumière's cinematographers, what was different about the early documentary films? They moved beyond recognition and

newspaper-style caption, but where to exactly? To begin answering these questions, I return to Soviet Russia in 1922 and to documentary's second claim.

vii. What did documentary learn to say?

To claim that a film image contains any kind of duality is to enter into a philosophical minefield. The idea that a film shot both is and isn't what it shows has been with us since the earliest encounters with motion pictures. In the summer of 1896, Maxim Gorky labeled cinema “the kingdom of shadows,” invoking the Platonic metaphor and splitting appearance from essence.¹²⁶ The following winter in London's *New Review*, a critic by the name of O. Winter summed up all of cinema with one cheeky paradox: “it is all true and all false.”¹²⁷ The trope of duality has been applied to the moving image ever since, snowballing to become a large bundle of disparate, even contradictory, ideas.

One of the earliest concepts in the history of film theory, *photogenie*, was for its earliest proponents, Jean Epstein and Louis Delluc, based on the notion that objects take on a new value when captured on film. Epstein saw it as a type of animation that brought new life to an object.¹²⁸ The earliest person, to my knowledge, who posits this duality, even plurality, with respect to questions of film meaning was Bela Balasz, for whom:

In a film, like in a painting, there can be nothing that is implied. The secondary meaning must always be brought to the surface as a parallel. The deeper meaning of film lies in this mutual coexistence. That which exists underneath produces multiple surface meanings.¹²⁹

Balasz's idea that different meanings co-exist within a single image has likewise assumed different forms. In the context of non-fiction film, the plurality of meaning is often split into visual and informational groups. In an early attempt to theorize meaning in documentary, Jay Leyda proposed the following division:

¹²⁶ Gorky, Maxim "The Lumière Cinematograph" in Taylor, Richard and Ian Christie eds. *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents* (New York: Routledge, p.25

¹²⁷ Abel ed., *Encyclopedia of Early Film*, p.7

¹²⁸ Yampolsky, Mikhail *Видимый Мир: очерки ранней кинофеноменологии* (Moscow: Institut Kinoiskusstva, 1984), 75-76.

¹²⁹ Yampolsky, *Видимый Мир*, 89. My translation.

There is a double content in each piece of newsreel. Information of various sorts as well as a formal content (the areas of black, white, and greys), that makes up the shapes of the people and places, the distribution of these areas into compositions, movement, direction and rhythm of movement.¹³⁰

Leyda uses the term *newsreel* because the earliest compilation films—the subject of his study—bring the question of film meaning to the forefront by virtue of their heightened emphasis on editing. Basing his reflections on the work of Esfir Shub, Leyda assumes an editor's point of view and a montage-inflected understanding of film meaning.

Duality with respect to film meaning is also found in accounts that are less informed by an editor's perspective on material. Consider John Grierson's account of his approach to filming *Drifters* (1929):

Image for this, image for that. For the settling of darkness, not darkness itself, but flocks of birds silhouetted against the sky flying hard in the camera: repeated and repeated. For the long drift in the night, not the ship, not the sea itself, but the dark mystery of the underwater.¹³¹

The sort of substitution that Grierson describes is not unique to non-fiction. Such processes are at work in all narratives. But while the co-existence of literal and figurative meanings is a property of film generally, documentary is unique in that this duality has been regularly invoked to explain the medium's origins.¹³²

¹³⁰ Leyda, Jay *Films Beget Films* 22

¹³¹ Grierson, *Grierson on Documentary*, 136.

¹³² Based on Tom Gunning's writings on D.W. Griffin, it seems that the analogous concept at work in narrative cinema's transition beyond "cinema of attractions" is the utilization of film techniques for the advancement of narrative. For an in-depth discussion of this issue including Gunning's argument as well as some opposing viewpoints, please see *Early cinema: Space frame, narrative* (Elsaesser ed.)

It should also be noted that the "dual nature" of documentary shares many assumptions with the theory of film according to which every shot by virtue of being filmed gained a certain level of flexibility or as Vertov put it a "new value." In fact, Kuleshov's experiments were a demonstration of just this. Over the course of this dissertation I will have many opportunities to return to the relationship between documentary propositions and montage theory. For the time being, I would like to merely that those writing of documentary's "dual nature" put more emphasis on the coexistence of the two aspects, rather than the creation of a new meaning.

In contemporary writing on documentary, the clearest articulation of how documentary's dual meaning distinguished it from early non-fiction film appears in the writings of Welsh documentary editor and theorist, Dai Vaughan. Along with Bill Nichols, Vaughan has been credited with bringing “close, conceptually informed analysis” to the study of non-fiction film and, in doing so, developing documentary film into an area of serious academic inquiry.¹³³

In *For Documentary*, Vaughan's collection of essays, one comes across several attempts to articulate what I have been referring to as the *two claims hypothesis*.

Vaughan's most succinct version is:

A documentary makes—implicitly—two claims: on the one hand to present us with images referring unashamedly to their sources; on the other, to articulate a statement of which those sources will be the object.¹³⁴

Documentary, for Vaughan, always involves a meta-language that is capable of commenting on the referent from outside the language of photography and, one reasons, from outside the formal vocabulary of early non-fiction cinema. The need to distinguish documentary from earlier forms was, according to Vaughan, a response to the conceptual incoherence inherent in seeing the actuality film as a pure record. To prove this, Vaughan sketches the following genealogy:

True, the first films were of a “factual” nature; but the medium was not out of its immobile, one-shot infancy when someone saw the possibility that it might signify something other than that which it recorded – this step being taken by Melies, a prestidigitator. From now on, it was non-fiction films, which were to be distinguished by a special name: actualities.

The problems latent in the idea of actuality become compounded at precisely the point where this name becomes inadequate and must be replaced by the more evasive one, “documentary”: **the point at which the primordial image becomes articulated as language**... The difficulties are twofold. Firstly, this is

¹³³ Corner, John “Documentary Studies: Dimensions of transition and continuity” in *Rethinking Documentary: New Perspectives, New Practices* ed. Austin and de Jong (Berkshire, UK: McGraw Hill-Open University Press, 2008), 14.

¹³⁴ Vaughan, Dai *For Documentary* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 30.

the point at which it becomes possible for the articulations to be used – and perhaps inevitably for them to be perceived – as implicit indications of the nature and status of the component images. Secondly, there is clearly no sense in which the one-to-one relation of shot to prior event may be said to hold good for a structured sequence, let alone for an entire film. [my emphasis]¹³⁵

Vaughan knows as well as anyone that actualities and newsreel journals were never without a linguistic component, whether textual or oral. This raises the question of just what he means when he says that an image had to be “articulated as language.” Given the evolutionary arc—from actuality to documentary—described in Vaughan's essay, one must assume that linguistic practices used in early non-fiction do not amount to the image becoming “articulated as language.” Why not? Vaughan never answers directly. The closest he comes is to suggest, somewhat opaquely, that the linguistic articulations he has in mind are perceived as “implicit indications of the nature and status of the component images.”¹³⁶

Vaughan's idea of the second claim as an “implicit indication” is fascinating and frustrating all at once because of its strong resonance with the idea of *cognitive perception*. Perceptual psychologists identify two domains of perception: *sense* and *cognitive*. *Sense perception* includes basic features such as color and spatial properties. *Cognitive perception* depends on concepts, and assigns functional significance and identities to objects.¹³⁷ The most basic of these is the concept of *object* itself.

Most contemporary philosophers agree: *cognitive perception* pervades *sense perception*. The distinction between the two, however, is difficult to maintain because “perceptual processes are constructive: they produce perceptual representations by

¹³⁵ Vaughan, *For Documentary*, 60-1.

¹³⁶ Vaughan, *For Documentary*, 61.

¹³⁷ For more on this distinction see Hatfield, Gary *Perception & Cognition: essays in the philosophy of psychology*. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009), 5.

processing information."¹³⁸ The difficulties that pervade attempts—across various disciplines—to differentiate cognitive and sense perception makes documentary's development as a medium significant beyond film history. After all, in trying to make records of specific events into vehicles of propositional content the earliest documentarians sought a film language that pushed perception in a more cognitive direction. My project in this dissertation is to put the emergence of documentary into dialogue with various theories of meaning that help enrich our understanding of the second claim. Thus, before we return to Moscow in 1922, to see this developments on the ground, I will first consider several approaches taken by film scholars and philosophers to theorize *cognitive perception* both with respect to film and to our phenomenological experience of the world as such.

A useful starting point is Christian Metz's essay "The Named and the Perceived." Metz's chief concern in the essay is the mechanics of transcodage. He begins with a statement about the heterogeneity of the verbal and the visual:

The relationship between language and perception is very different than that between two languages (=translation), because in this case the two codes no longer have an identical semiological status and no longer occupy the same place within the general process of socialization.¹³⁹

What distinguishes language from all other codes, even, on occasion, from itself, is its propensity to function as a meta-language. Metz explains:

Compared with all nonlinguistic codes, and with itself when necessary, language is in the position of a meta-language: a universal, nonscientific meta-language, "a major equivalent" exchangeable with all other codes, as is money against all other goods.¹⁴⁰

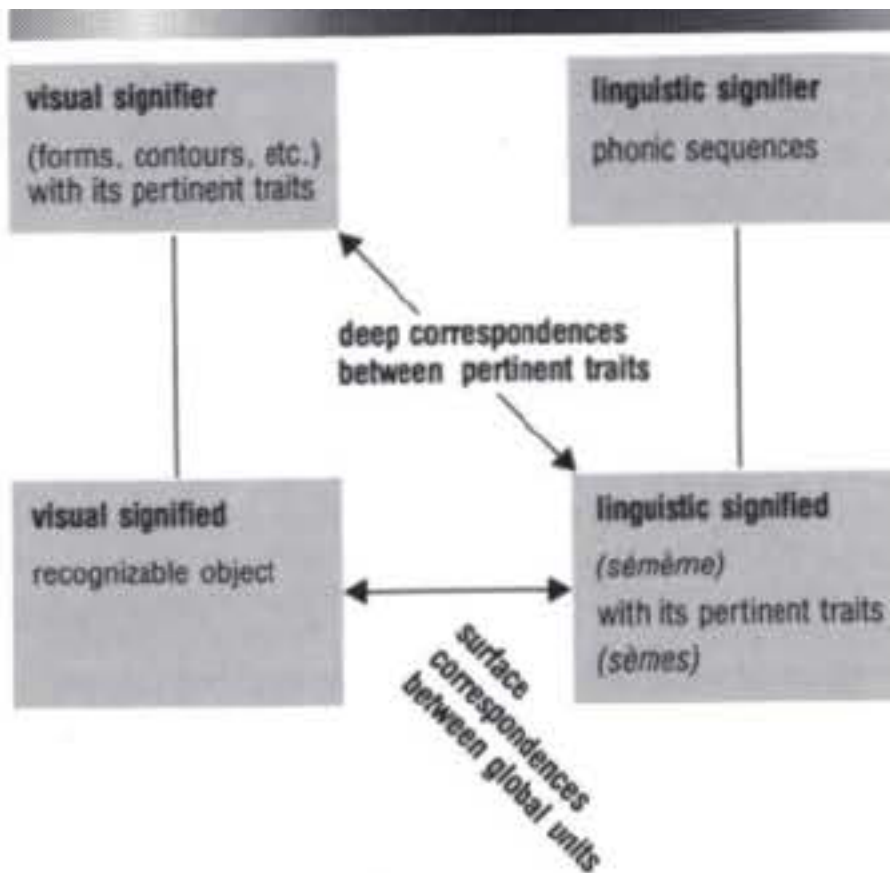
¹³⁸ Hatfield, *Perception & Cognition*, 7.

¹³⁹ Metz, Christian "The Perceived and the Named" in *Visual Communication* 6:3, (1980): 56-68.

¹⁴⁰ Metz, "The Perceived and the Named," 59.

Like currency, language's privileged status as a meta-code gives it the ability to delineate validity and define value. In this way Metz follows in the tradition of Russian semioticians such as Yuri Lotman and Boris Uspenski who conceived of language as a *primary modeling system* through which other systems of meaning are expressed.¹⁴¹

Drawing on the research of Hjemslev and Greimas, Metz suggests a *triangular* relationship between what is signified linguistically and the object perceived.¹⁴²



Metz assigns basic object recognition (dog, table) to the signified. The move from visual recognition to the linguistic realm occurs through correspondence with universals. This

¹⁴¹ Eco, Umberto *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 32.

¹⁴² Image: Metz, "The Perceived and the Named," 59.

move from visual to verbal involves not only translation of the visual into a universal but also transcoding:

between the pertinent traits of the signifier (on the side of the object-code) and those of the signified (on the side of the metacode) when one envisages the cultural classification of objects as an active operation of the metacodal type in which the main point plays itself against units 'smaller' than the whole *sémème*, at the outcome of concrete nomination. One conceives of this articulation as the historical production of nomination.¹⁴³

Above, Metz describes how our experience of a particular object, in a particular light and angle, adjusts and reorients the meaning conveyed. Such a triangular structure aligns with the notion of the documentary image as split into two claims. Such resonance is not, in itself, significant. Metz's analysis, however, offers insight into documentary poetics when we consider it alongside Bill Nichols' writings on the nature of evidence in documentary film.

Nichols' writing on documentary is part of a larger project to rescue and redeem the study of rhetoric from its tainted status in contemporary theory. According to Nichols, *rhetoric* and *visual rhetoric* have been maligned as practices that endlessly manipulate images, shoehorning various meaning into them. Nichols places the blame for this at the foot of Roland Barthes. Nichols writes, "Barthes' 'The Rhetoric of the Image'" can be seen as the nail in the coffin of visual culture, consigning it to perpetual suspicion about the deceptive practices and ideological effects of a proliferating image culture."¹⁴⁴

The alternative that Nichols promotes is to think of rhetoric more broadly, as an indispensable element present in any type of embodied speech. In this light, documentary emerges as a perfect example of such embodied speech:

¹⁴³ Metz, "The Perceived and the Named," 60.

¹⁴⁴ Nichols, Bill "The Question of Evidence, The Power of Rhetoric and Documentary Film" in Austin, Thomas ed., *Rethinking Documentary* (London: Open University Press, 2008), 33.

The “voice of documentary” as I have called it elsewhere, refers to a given film’s situated, embodied expression as it is conveyed by spoken words and silences, intertitles, music, composition, editing, tone or perspective with a primary emphasis on the effect of this symbolic form of action on the viewer.¹⁴⁵

Nichols' own version of the *two claims hypothesis* is that watching a documentary involves a constant vacillation between two claims, “between the recognition of historical reality and the recognition of an argument about it.”¹⁴⁶ The process of embodiment, as Nichols describes it above, is the creation of the second claim, a parallel “voice” that runs alongside the historical record.

Nichols' conception of “evidence” demonstrates how the first claim co-exists with the embodied voice of documentary. Documentary, like all discourse, works by externalizing its evidence:

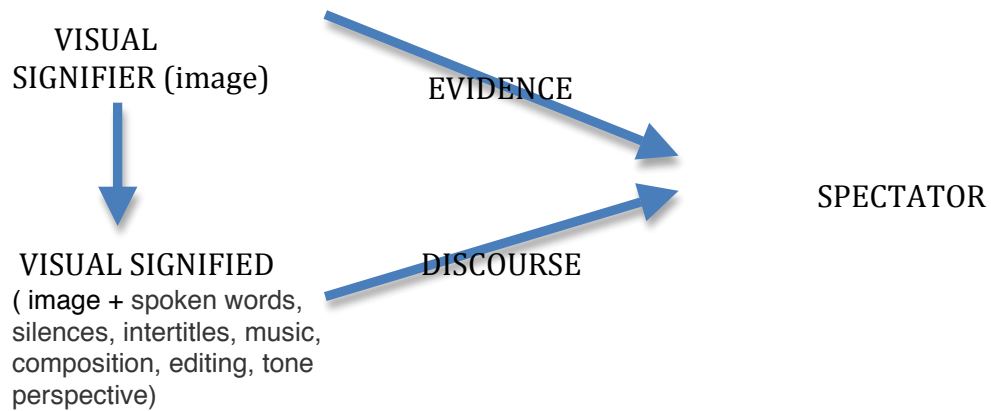
Evidence, then, is that part of discourse, be it rational-philosophic, poetic-narrative, or rhetorical, charged with a **double existence**: it is both part of the discursive chain and also of being external to it. In other words, facts become evidence when they are taken up in a discourse; and that discourse gains the force to compel belief through its capacity to refer evidence to a domain outside itself.¹⁴⁷

For Nichols, evidence in documentary impacts the discursive chain but remains referentially outside of it. Thinking back to the diagram from Metz’s “The Perceived and The Named” certain parallels emerge. Rendered graphically, Nichols’ model of documentary evidence looks something like this:

¹⁴⁵ Nichols, “The Question of Evidence,” 36.

¹⁴⁶ Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 28

¹⁴⁷ Nichols, “The Question of Evidence,” 29.



The structural similarity between Nichols’ and Metz’s models suggests that meaning-making in documentary—while taking place at a higher cognitive level—is analogous to the “production of nomination” present in our daily perception. For Metz, the linguistic signified (“concrete nomination”) emerges from the interplay of global units and particular pertinent traits. In Nichols’ model, one finds the same interplay between the image received as an evidentiary record, free of any discursive articulations, and the same image, as part of a discursive chain.

As a rendering of the *two claims hypothesis*, Nichols’ model of evidence, with its “double existence,” focuses on the mechanics involved in the process of meaning making. Furthermore, the image’s double function as record and as discourse corresponds to the distinction between physical portrayal and nominal depiction, originally proposed by the art historian Monroe Beardsley. Every shot in a non-abstract film physically represents its source with the indexical plenitude of photography. At the

same time, every image can also be used nominally, to depict a class of objects. I have previously pointed to this distinction using two illustrations from early Russian *photo-khronika*. The first picture was a physical representation of Nikolai II's visit of a battleship. The second illustration depicted the logistical advantage of having access to the Suez Canal.

For Beardsley, the difference between *physical representation* and *nominal depiction* comes down to how many classes of objects are being represented. The example he uses to illustrate the distinction in his *Aesthetics* is the sixty or so self-portraits Rembrandt completed. All the paintings physically portray one person (e.g. a class with only one member: the painter Rembrandt). At the same time, they depict numerous classes (e.g. a volcanic person, a vulnerable man, an aged one etc.)¹⁴⁸

In the world of film theory, Noel Carroll, in his *Theorizing the Moving Image*, has relied on Beardsley's terms to offer a critique of realist film theory. Carroll argues that "in a given film a shot can be presented via its context in a way that what is discursively important is not what is physically portrays."¹⁴⁹ For example, the physical portrayal of the individual soldier recedes when presented in a series of similarly framed men, thus assuming a nominal status as *soldier*. In the history of cinema, physical portrayal has been generally identified with the theories of André Bazin and with films that utilize the deep focus/long take aesthetic. Nominal depiction has been most closely associated with montage and the use of editing to create meaning. Such a sharp divide, however, obscures more than it elucidates. This is all the more true when dealing with documentary. The notion of a disjunction of nominal or physical representation elides the tension inherent in

¹⁴⁸ Beardsley, Monroe *Aesthetics: problems in the philosophy of criticism* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1980), 278.

¹⁴⁹ Carroll, Noel *Theorizing the Moving Image* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 240.

documentary's dual nature. This dual nature is what Nichols has in mind when he describes visual evidence as having a "double existence." Noel Carroll seems to support Nichols' account of documentary evidence and of the *two claims hypothesis* when he observes that "when we speak of films as evidence we usually have physical portrayal in mind."¹⁵⁰

Though he introduces physical portrayal and nominal depiction as alternatives, Carroll is well aware that any film involves a balancing act between the two modes of representation. For Carroll, the nominal vs. physical disjunction is a rhetorical weapon, one that can be used to point out errors inherent in realist film theory. Carroll writes:

Realist theorists tend to overemphasize the importance of physical portrayal in film. Montagists on the other hand, are proponents of nominal portrayal, especially of the way editing can function as an agency for this type of representation. The montagists did not invent nominal portrayal in film but they did aggressively conceptualize its relationship to editing. If the montagists erred, it is probably in their extreme deprecation of the photographic component of film. At times, in their enthusiasm, they seem to be not only denying the importance of physical portrayal but also claiming that a shot can be made to depict anything whatsoever (depending on its position in an edited sequence).¹⁵¹

By splitting filmmakers into two polarized camps, Carroll strengthens his argument about the shortsightedness of realist film theory but dodges any discussion of the give-and-take between the two representational modes, the very relationship, as I have been arguing, that is at the core of documentary practice. Doing so, Carroll commits the very mistake that he attributes to the montagists who err in their disregard of physical representation. To borrow a famous example from Eisenstein's writings, Carroll focuses on the tear and downplays what happens to the water and the eye in the process.

Observing a film editor at work, one quickly realizes that it is the give-and-take of physical representation and nominal depiction that determines rhetorical success.

¹⁵⁰ Carroll, *Theorizing the Moving Image*, 240.

¹⁵¹ Carroll, *Theorizing the Moving Image*, 241.

Consider one of the oldest and most ubiquitous documentary conventions: the crowd cutaway. Crowd cutaways were used to suggest spatial and temporal continuity in the first newsreel journals. The technique reached its affective propagandistic peak in the films of Leni Riefenstahl. Since then, the crowd cutaway or, more generally, the responder cutaway has become common to most documentary genres and has been used to serve every conceivable rhetorical end.¹⁵²

Cutting away to a face in the crowd is a classic example of nominal depiction. The selected person depicts the crowd as a whole. Let's imagine a hypothetical editor who, while working for a television news program, is tasked with selecting a crowd cutaway. After filming an outdoor event, a diligent cameraman brings back seven cutaway options. For argument's sake, let's assume that all seven are of similar scale, angle and quality, the main difference between them are the subjects themselves. Looking over the seven options, certain peculiarities will cause our editor to nix some shots immediately—striped shirts, physical handicaps, loud labels, the inability to sit still etc. Shots containing these traits will be deemed inappropriate for different reasons: some strictly visual, others based on established habits of television news viewers. In other words, of the seven cutaways, some will meet the cutting floor because they are excessively individualistic. Put another way, the physical particularity of a particular image prevent it from becoming sufficiently nominal in a given sequence.

At the other end of the spectrum, our editor encounters and dismisses overly bland and stereotypical subjects. Even though these shots do not distract from the rhetorical continuity of the sequence and can stand-in for the crowd as a whole, they cause the

¹⁵² Though flagrant manipulations of time, because they suggest simultaneity, responder cutaways are common even in ethnographic cinema.

spectator to lose interest and diminish the segment's impact. In their ordinariness, these cutaways can be said to depict nominally to a fault. What our editor is after, then, is an above average, visually pleasant though non-extraordinary, crowd cutaway. The subject should be enthusiastic, but not overly so.

Returning to the question of what it was that documentaries learned to express, we should inquire what the distinction between nominal depiction vs. physical representation is able to tell us. On the one hand, the ability of photographic images to depict a class of objects implies that images can be propositional. On the other, the thought experiment with the news editor suggests that nominal depiction in documentary will always be partial, and never completely detached from specific physical properties. To borrow language from Carroll, complete deprecation of the physical referent is not possible.¹⁵³

The question that follows from the possibility of an image to stand in for a group—to behave as symbols in propositional logic—is whether an image that is articulated in this way is capable of expressing a truth claim? Many have pondered the idea of truth claims with respect to photographs. It is generally agreed that while photographs are able to furnish evidence for a formulated belief or stated linguistic proposition, when considered in isolation they do not admit truth-values. In the words of Stanley Cavell, “to say that photographs lie implies that they might tell the truth; but the beauty of their nature is to say nothing, neither to lie nor not to.”¹⁵⁴ Like Sidney's poet, photographs never lie because they never affirm.

Since antiquity, truth claims and arguments have been considered verbal phenomena. Arguments use truth claims to proceed by implication, providing

¹⁵³ Carroll, *Theorizing the Moving Image*, 243.

¹⁵⁴ Cavell, *Stanley Cavell on Film* (Binghamton, NY: SUNY Press, 2005), 136.

recognizable reasons for a given position. To do this, an argument requires a language—formal or natural—that makes use of symbols (e.g. signs that stand in for classes of objects). Such a language makes it possible for the listener to consent to a proposition about an entire group of objects. On these criteria alone, nominal depiction, given some basic semiotic competency on the part of the viewer, allows for the possibility of an argument even when the images are not accompanied by direct linguistic assertions. This seems to be implied in Carroll’s position that a “filmic context” is able to establish discursive importance distinct from the physical referent.¹⁵⁵

Amidst the current wave of interest in visual rhetoric, the question of *visual arguments* has enjoyed much attention. Scholars of rhetoric, such as Scott Jacobs, have come out against visual arguments and reasserted the nature of argument and interpretation as solely linguistic. Writing from the perspective of normative pragmatics, Jacobs offers the following narrow definition of argument:

Arguments are fundamentally linguistic entities that express with a special pragmatic force propositions where those propositions stand in particular inferential relationships to one another... Among other things, in making an argument one commits to defending the truth of a complex of propositions and to undertaking to get the hearer to accept the truth of one proposition (call it the standpoint) as being justified by the truth of other propositions (call those the arguments).¹⁵⁶

Coming to a similar conclusion, David Fleming in “Can pictures be arguments?” rejects the idea of a visual argument on much the same grounds.¹⁵⁷ For Fleming, the visual is inescapably vague and ambiguous. Arguments must have propositional content and visual communications do not. Commitment to one set of propositions allows one to

¹⁵⁵ Carroll, *Theorizing the Moving Image*, 243.

¹⁵⁶ Jacobs, Scott "Rhetoric and Dialectic from the Standpoint of Normative Pragmatics," *Argumentation* 14 (2000), 270.

¹⁵⁷ Fleming, "Can pictures be arguments?" in *Defining Visual Rhetoric*, 45.

imply a modified new belief and thereby reach a desired conclusion. The indexical plenitude of photographs, the argument goes, prevents the kind of commitment needed to sustain an argument. The ambiguity of an image makes it unclear what considerations the spectator is granting. This ambiguity in the antecedent, in turn, makes the consequent equally indeterminate.

At their core, these objections rest on the assumed inability of visual arguments to provide an analogue to an *enthymeme*, an informally stated syllogism, discussed by Aristotle in the first part of his *Rhetoric*. There are certain elements in the above rejection of the possibility of visual arguments that I find persuasive. For example, it seems incontrovertible that the image's inability to admit negation makes argumentation difficult. At the same time, I can't escape the idea that the sequencing of images works to create inferential relations.

Overall, I find the hard-line position sketched out above extremely problematic. Imposing such a strict definition of argument and proposition turns the question of visual arguments into the nitpicky and less consequential one of whether visual material can persuade in the *exact* same manner as language. Moreover, philosophers of logic and language have recognized vagueness as a factor distinct from ambiguity and generality. Thus, it seems reasonable to entertain the possibility of a visual argument, vagueness of the visual notwithstanding.¹⁵⁸

The logician Charles Sanders Peirce acknowledged vagueness as a factor in linguistic propositions. In the 1902 *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology*, under the entry for *vague*, Peirce writes:

¹⁵⁸ The most comprehensive philosophical overview of vagueness can be found in Graff, Delia and Timothy Williamson *Vagueness* (Aldershot, NH: Ashgate Publishing, 2002).

A proposition is vague when there are possible states of things concerning which it is *intrinsically uncertain* whether, had they been contemplated by the speaker, he would have regarded them as excluded or allowed by the proposition. By intrinsically uncertain we mean not uncertain in consequence of any ignorance of the interpreter, but because the speaker's habits of language were indeterminate.¹⁵⁹

In analytic philosophy vagueness is standardly defined as "the possession of borderline cases."¹⁶⁰ Borderline cases involve vague predicates that are inquiry resistant, meaning that no conceptual analysis or empirical investigation is able to settle whether a man 175cm in height is tall or whether chopping one head from a two-headed man amounts to decapitating him. While most words can be both ambiguous and vague, the speaker cannot resolve cases of vagueness without departing from literal usage. Vagueness, Roy Sorensen argues, "condemns us to draw a sharp line somewhere. If the line is not drawn between the true and the false, then it will be between the true and then intermediate state. Introducing further intermediates just delays the inevitable."¹⁶¹

Setting aside the substantial challenges that vagueness presents for analytic philosophy, the concessions that have been made to it over the last century would seem sufficient for not dismissing visual argumentation at the outset. Despite this, the hard-line approach to visual arguments has continued to receive broad support from such prominent figures as the French scholar Olivier Reboul, who has insisted that rhetoric be redefined as the "art of persuading by means of speech."¹⁶² The impact of this intransigence goes beyond semantics and negatively affects the study of visual culture. In affixing rhetoric to language, Scott, Fleming, and Reboul relegate visual material to the

¹⁵⁹ Peirce, C.S., "Vague", in *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology*, J.M. Baldwin ed., (New York: MacMillan, 1902), 748.

¹⁶⁰ Sorensen, Roy, "Vagueness", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2012 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), Accessed 08/12/12 at <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2012/entries/vagueness/>.

¹⁶¹ Sorensen, "Vagueness."

¹⁶² Hill ed., *Defining Visual Rhetoric*, 42.

broad and ill-defined nether region of *persuasion*, a domain that includes everything from emotional appeals to being held at gunpoint.

Among film scholars interested in rhetoric—Carl Plantinga and Trevor Ponech among them—the consensus has been to follow suit and leave *argument* to the province of logic with *persuasion* used to cover the rhetorical work of all visual media. In *Rhetoric and Representation in Non-fiction Film*, Plantinga explains the distinction as follows:

To make an argument is to claim that a conclusion, usually in the form of a proposition, merits belief on the basis of salient evidence, true premises, and valid reasoning. Persuasion, on the other hand, involves is a much less formal process – the art of getting someone to do or believe what you want them to do or believe.¹⁶³

I do not wish to get bogged down in debates over the technical definition of *argument*. My position is simply that restricting visual argumentation to the province of persuasion—encompassing all human endeavors that use symbols to communicate with one another—unnecessarily limits our understanding of documentary's rhetorical capabilities. Later on, I will argue that the idea of a visual argument is inadequate because it misrepresents the nature of meaning in film. But even before delving into the peculiarities of film meaning, I believe there are convincing reasons not to dispense with visual arguments and propositions altogether.

First, and most obviously, many documentaries are received as providing grounds for a particular point of view and thus can be said to behave as arguments. The capacity to provide reasons for belief has traditionally been the benchmark used to distinguish arguments from other kinds of symbolic communication. Although lacking certain logical operators (e.g. negation) documentaries use editing and other techniques to

¹⁶³ Plantinga, Carl *Rhetoric and Representation in Non-fiction Film* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 122.

create inferential relations. Thus, cross-cutting in documentary is often used in a way that is reminiscent of the conditional operative to create an antecedent/consequent relationship between shots.

Even more importantly, documentaries use language in ways reminiscent of oral arguments (*reductio proofs*, demonstrative proofs etc). If images are *de facto* banned from the province of argumentation, one is committed to saying that images in a film can only function as illustrations and emotional supplements to the propositions delivered linguistically. Avoiding such a sharp divide creates a better vantage point from which to consider the interplay of physical representation and nominal depiction used in documentary's pursuit of rhetorical ends. A great deal can be learned by looking at the ways documentary films compensate for their inability to attain the status of rigidly logical propositions. For example, looking at a film like Viktor Turin's *Turksib*, one could observe that spatial and temporal relations between shots are broken and rearranged into a structure reminiscent of a syllogism in order to convey more universal meaning to the events displayed.

Even if images are nominal and propositional only to a degree, then the implications of this semi-nominal status must be addressed in considering documentary's origins. If we accept the consensus that the origins of the medium lie in the ability to make two types of claims, to combine physical portrayal with linguistic articulation/nominal depiction, then the formal demands of rhetoric present us with an extraordinary perspective on the interaction of documentary's two claims.

I do not believe that accepting nominal depiction and propositionality in motion pictures commits one to visual arguments as such. After all, neither physical

representation nor nominal depiction is unique to documentary. Virtually any representation can be contextualized and indexed to represent physically or depict nominally; any fiction film, or for that matter, any observed slice of life, involves a back and forth between physical perception and nominal categorization. Documentary is unique in that the proper balance between the two claims is central to the film's communicative success. In some sense, documentary enacts the filmic analogue of what in classical rhetoric would be called a *sylllepsis*, the co-existence of both the figurative and the literal meanings. As Jacques Ranciere puts it, "The *sylllepsis* does not distinguish between the specific scene and the world it symbolizes."¹⁶⁴

Recognizing the ways in which nominal depiction in documentary deviates from the rigid logical standards set by hard-line rhetoricians avoids positing the two claims as a dichotomy of image and language and directs our attention to the question of their mediation. Dai Vaughan makes a similar point when he insists that the heterogeneity of the two claims should not be taken as grounds for seeing them as alternatives. For Vaughan, both the legibility of the individual documentary image and the existence of the medium as such, depend on seeing beyond the dichotomy. He writes:

Let us look again at the dichotomy film-as-record/film-as-language with whose subjective aspect we began. If documentary were merely record, then editors would not be needed to order it, since to grant significance to the order in which records are presented is to impute to it a linguistic nature; yet if documentary were language pure and simple, editors would not be needed to manipulate it, since there would be no meanings generated other than those commonly available – to film crews and viewers alike. Clearly these twin aspects of the medium are not to be understood as alternatives.¹⁶⁵

Culling together the reflections in this section leads to the following hypothesis: the transition from actuality to documentary manifests itself as a co-existence of the

¹⁶⁴ Ranciere, Jacques *Film Fables* (London: Berg Press, 2006), 29.

¹⁶⁵ Vaughan, *For Documentary*, 79.

medium's "twin aspects"—physical portrayal and nominal depiction—and the development of film techniques that trigger the viewer's vacillation between the two. The possibility of nominal depiction informs the transition to documentary but does not define it. Carroll puts this point well when he says nominal depiction is important for documentary because it “pries the individual shot from its specific referent and in doing so opens up another possibility of representation.”¹⁶⁶ It is a pre-condition for the discovery of the medium’s epistemic function: the purported ability to interpret its own source material.

Thus, the central question regarding the origins of documentary is not whether nominal depiction is present or absent but how the interaction between the two modes of representation is utilized in a given work. How does the formal language of film explore and catalyze the viewer's interaction with the two claims? Looking back at *Astrakhan Fish Factory* and other industrials, it is clear that they depict a general class of production. Nonetheless, most would agree that they are not yet documentaries. The reason for this, I suspect, is not unrelated to the role exerted by aesthetic influence of portraiture and visual arts and the formal techniques that characterize the “view aesthetic.” The sum of these factors emphasizes physical portrayal and works to suppress rather than open up the tension between the two modes of representation, between documentary's two claims. In the Soviet Union, the tension between them would begin to be tested in the *Kino-Pravda* newsreel journal.

¹⁶⁶ Carroll, *Theorizing the Moving Image*, 241.

ix. 1922—the year newsreel broke.

Several histories of early Soviet film, including Denise Youngblood's *Soviet Cinema in the Silent Era*, choose 1923 as the year when the Soviet film industry begins to show signs of life after its collapse during the Civil War period. With production once again underway, 1923 brought the first Soviet blockbusters such as Perestiani's *The Red Imps* and landmarks such as Kuleshov's *The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks*. But looking beyond individual films, there are reasons to see 1922 as the year that Soviet film comes alive.

Like 1918, 1922 was an anniversary year; the Bolshevik government had held up for five years. On the first anniversary of the October Revolution in 1918, the Bolshevik control of the country was faltering at best. By 1922, some sense of permanence and stability could be felt. 1922 was likewise a watershed year for *khronika*. The launch of *Kino-Pravda* in August of 1922 marked the return of the newsreel journal to Soviet screens. 13 issues of the journal would be released in 1922.

The fifth anniversary itself was celebrated with several commemorative *khronika* compilations. Films such as *October's Fifth Jubilee (Юбилей V Октября)*, *The Day of the Komsomol (День комсомола)*, *The Confiscation of Church Valuables (Изъятие церковных ценностей)*, as well as Vertov's *The Trial of the Left S.R.'s (Процесс эсеров)* were shown at Moscow's public plazas on the day of the anniversary. Some of the fifth anniversary films such as *The Fifth Year (Пятый год)* were exported to Europe and the United States where they attracted large crowds.¹⁶⁷ The film's international

¹⁶⁷ Vishnevski, *25 лет советского кино в хронологических датах*, 17.

premiere was held in New York's Labor Temple where the film played to a packed house of seven thousand people.¹⁶⁸

In government circles, previous talk about *khronika* as a form of historical writing suddenly became actionable. On April 12th, following a report by the grandfather of Revolutionary *khronika* G. Boltianski, NARKOMPROS (i.e. Commissariat for the Enlightenment) authorized the creation of a new kino-museum in order to archive and organize existing newsreel, some 70,000 meters, capturing the history of the 20th century thus far.¹⁶⁹

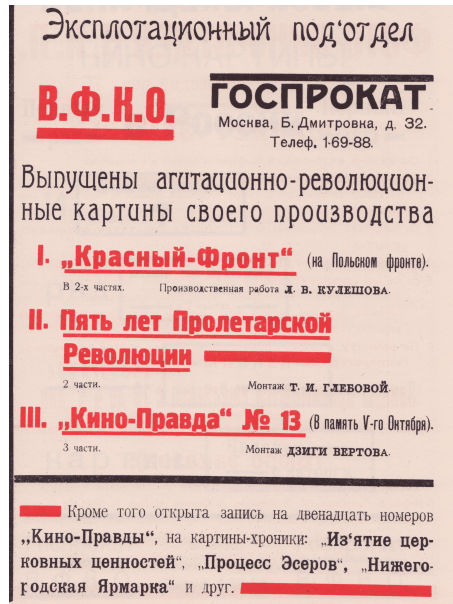
Along with resurgent production and renewed political interest, 1922 is also notable as the year when a new way of writing about and discussing *khronika* emerges. Following the publication of Aleksei Gan's Constructivist journal *Kino-Fot*, as well as a series of articles in *LEF* and *Pravda*, *khronika* ceased to be an abstract social good and began to be analyzed as concrete film practice. *Kino-Fot* was the site of Dziga Vertov's first manifestoes, theoretical reflections by Gan, Kuleshov and others. It was the forum where *Kino-Pravda's* formal innovations were recognized, where *khronika* began to overspill its conceptual banks.

Prior to 1922, a *khronika* film was rarely thought of as the sum of its components, let alone a sum that added up to something greater. *Khronika* was piecemeal, a collection of individual moments rather than a cohesive whole. With the release of *Kino-Pravda* the tendency to see *khronika* in this piecemeal fashion begins to fade. Audiences and filmmakers slowly begin to entertain the idea that newsreel films were films, and not merely strings of unrelated shots.

¹⁶⁸ For more on the film's screening abroad see *Новый мир* (July 23, 1923), 3.

¹⁶⁹ *Правда* № 258, (November 15, 1922), 6.

The fact that 1922 was an anniversary year may have had a good deal to do with the sea change in thinking. Providing an overview of events and encapsulating the first tumultuous half-decade of Bolshevik rule, the commemorative newsreel films were promoted as feature attractions. An advertisement for three "agit-revolutionary films, domestically produced" was published in *Kino-Fot*.



The three films advertised are Kuleshov's *On The Red Front*, T. Glebova's *Five Years of the Proletarian Revolution*, and the 13th issue of Dziga Vertov's newsreel journal. The newsreel-fiction hybrid *On The Red Front* is credited as being "the production work of Lev Kuleshov." For the other two films, Tatiana Glebova¹⁷⁰ and Dziga Vertov are said to be in charge of "montage." Like *khronika*, the word montage would be somewhat unstable in Soviet Russia, standing for both film editing in general, and a distinctive film style that begins to emerge around this time.

¹⁷⁰ Glebova's film does not seem to have survived. I was unable to find any other mention of her other work in any of the Russian film archives.

The fact that *Kino-Pravda* would appear on the poster such as this is an indication how far the newsreel journal had come aesthetically. Most of this was the work of the *kinoks*. In her memoirs, the documentarian Esfir Shub describes the transition Vertov initiated as that of making pictures into images and of asserting control over production:

Current events, various occurrences, and the daily life of the country were filmed even before Vertov. Vertov's first work was made from this *khronika*. But the quality of the shot was unsatisfactory, insufficient in their content, in their lack of forethought, in their form – in the pictorial imagicity of the shot. And so Vertov put himself in control of the filming.¹⁷¹

Prefiguring the *two claims hypothesis*, Shub distinguishes between a shot's informational content (“содержание”) and its formal properties (“форме”) and states that Vertov synthesizes both into an *obraz*, that untranslatable, sacral word usually rendered as *image*. Shub's main point here is that by centralizing control over *khronika* production Vertov—during this early lesser-studied part of his career—brought the idea of authorship to the non-fiction film. Though Vertov would have a sufficiently tortured relationship with how to be credited in his own films—author, supervisor, worker—Shub's assessment of his contribution is nonetheless accurate.

That being said, one should resist an auteurist reading when considering this early period of Vertov's work. While an auteurist perspective, perhaps to Vertov's dismay, is appropriate for discussing later films such as the *11th Year*(1928) or *Enthusiasm*(1930), the reality of film production during this earlier period (1922-1927) requires us to consider “Vertov” both as a fiery, strong-minded, ambitious individual but also as something of a collective that includes kinok-collaborators—Ivan Beliakov, Ilya Kopolin,

¹⁷¹ Shub, Esfir *Жизнь моя – кинематограф* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1972), 85. Russian: События, происшествия, жизнь страны снимали и до Вертова. Первые работы Д. Вертова тоже сделаны из этих хроник. Но качество кадров его не удовлетворяло ни по содержанию, то есть по осмысливанию снимаемого, ни по форме – по живописной образности кадра. Поэтому он сам стал вести съемки. [My translation].

Alexander Lemberg, Elizaveta Svilova, Mikhail Kaufman—most of whom went on to direct documentaries in the second half of the 1920s and in the 1930s.

While cases of disputed authorship – as with *The Unsealing of the Remains of Sergii of Radonezh*—are rare, Vertov's role in the films shifts as does the extent of his participation. As his reputation grew during the first half of the 1920s, more commissions came his way, requiring him to do some outsourcing. Thus, much of research and filming on *Stride, Soviet!* was done by Ivan Kopalín and Ilya Beliakov, allowing Vertov to focus more of his attention on the globe-spanning *A Sixth Part of the World*.¹⁷² While Vertov clearly developed the initial plan for the film, the level of Kopalín and Beliakov's creative input is not entirely clear.

Broadly speaking, before non-fiction film could be understood in authorial terms, the medium had to grapple with itself and discover its expressive possibilities. Vertov's efforts, impressive as they are, could only accelerate the bigger cultural transition underway: the changing perception of what documentary images are and what they are able to signify. My interest is in this bigger transition and the role non-fiction film plays in it. That is why rather than looking at the work of a particular filmmaker—Vertov, Shub, Erofeev—I prefer to look at *khronika* as a concept and attempt to trace its development.

Between 1922-1927, *khronika* filmmaking follows two interwoven lines of development. First, in order to dismantle the sharp verbal/visual divide characteristic of, what Vertov called, "informational newsreel" (информационная хроника), the *Kino-*

¹⁷² Mackay, John "Film Energy: Process and Metanarrative in Dziga Vertov's *The Eleventh Year* (1928)" in *October* No. 121. (Summer 2007), 41-78.

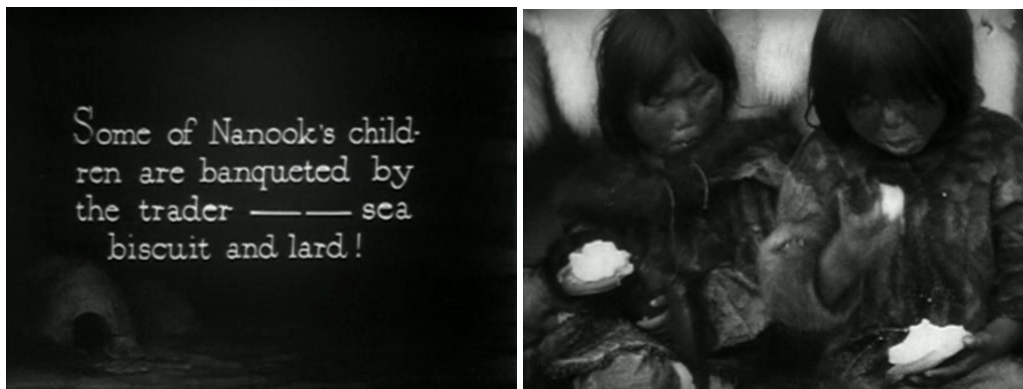
Pravda newsreel journal sheds its journal form and becomes an experimental laboratory for the integration of text and image. Vertov and his collaborators realized that when titles are strictly factual and curtailed from pathos, affect, and rhythm, the image is unable to participate in additional processes of figuration. To dismantle the title card's annotative control over an image, the kinoks begin to conceive the text-image as a hybrid utterance, a multimedia analogue of the speech act. Titles in *Kino-Pravda* move away from the nominative case and add case inflection to the words. The effect is that grammatical inflection extends to the image. This has epistemological implications. Applied to the image, these grammatical relations stand-in for causal and ontological relations between objects in the real world. Throughout *Kino-Pravda* images are used to complete phrases or serve as word substitutes. Thus, instead of being a source of information, the titles come to direct the meaning behind shot transitions by giving the image a grammatical inflection. Vertov pushes the technique of making an image into a speech act to its limit in the film *Stride, Soviet!* where titles are reduced to conjunctions (*but, if, and*), temporal markers (*then, now*), and single word utterances.

While testing different ways of integrating title and image, *Kino-Pravda* also explores ways of organizing non-fiction material in order to make non-fiction engaging for more than one or two reels. As part of this process, the assumptions of the *view aesthetic* are overturned. The analogous transition in fiction film occurs between 1912-15, when a cinematic mode favoring a single point of view—the *cinema of attractions*—is replaced by a *cinema of narrative integration* that breaks with the idea of a fixed observer and allows for shifts in optical perspective (e.g. reverse angle shot). Whereas in a *cinema of attractions*, optical perspective and narrative remained separate, *narrative*

integration made the film's optical perspective subservient to narrative efficiency and the rules of continuity editing.¹⁷³

The analogous transition in the language of non-fiction film—from *the view aesthetic* to something else—has not, to my knowledge, been theorized or, for that matter, even discussed at any great length. As we shall see in *Kino-Pravda*, the unity of space and time is gradually replaced with an understanding of non-fiction film as an internal monologue, occurring within a single consciousness that synthesizes words, images, graphs etc. into a coherent whole. This process made *khronika* filmmaking interactive and more directly assertive. The presumed interactivity of *khronika* is perhaps the key difference between Vertov and the American documentary pioneer Robert Flaherty.

Flaherty's is a cinema of narrative vignettes. In *Nanook of the North*, the director's discovery was to combine ethnographic expedition, a popular early film genre, with a literary framework and continuity editing. Consider the sequence of Nanook's children overindulging and then repenting:



¹⁷³ The transition is described at great length in Gunning, Tom, *D.W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film: THE EARLY YEARS AT BIOGRAPH* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press 1993).

But Allegoo indulged
to excess, so the trader
sends for — — castor
oil!



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In moments such as the above match cut on the spoon reaching Allegoo's mouth, Flaherty adapts the aesthetics of *narrative integration* and simulates the conventions of continuity editing; beginning with a wide shot and tightening as the drama increases.

While there are certainly narrative sequences and match cuts in *Kino-Pravda*, the larger aesthetic paradigm of *narrative integration* was not a feasible organizational axis for *khronika*. The disparate stories and the informational requirements of newsreel were at odds and not easily compatible with making a single protagonist into an axis around which the film could coalesce. Yet the need for an organizational axis remained.

Consequently, Vertov spends the first half of the 1920s introducing a series of such axes into non-fiction filmmaking; premises around which *khronika* could be organized. They begin as recurring motifs: a man reading the newspaper throughout *Kino-Pravda*#5. From

¹⁷⁴ *Nanook of the North* dir: Robert Flaherty. Criterion Collection. Framegrab.

there, Vertov experiments with organization based on the physical length of the film strip, then again around the premise of a camera as a character on a physical journey. Eventually, the camera's ability to travel across space is enriched by an ability to travel back in time and recall the historical past. The process culminates with Vertov's most famous concept, that of the *kino-eye*, a higher form of film consciousness, a mental entity capable of reading the world, perceiving images as laden with propositional content.

I've described two lines of development: the movement to integrate text and image into a single utterance and the search for a new organizational axis. In future sections, I look at specific examples of both. I've introduced the two directions in which *khronika* develops in some detail in order to avoid the temptation of picking out a proto-narrative sequence in *Kino-Nedelia* or a piece of title design in *Kino-Pravda* as a turning points that determines future development. Vertov, an expert promoter of his own work, was not immune from this tendency and frequently trumpeted his latest achievements in such terms. I pre-empt this in my own writing because in documentary, even more than in most film, the first instance of a particular innovation is less important than the gradual integration of a given technique into a pre-existing film grammar.¹⁷⁵ Given the percentage of early film that is lost—estimates run as high as 85% for the silent era—clinging to breakthroughs feels all the more foolhardy.

By identifying these two lines of developments at the outset, I also hope to avoid the pitfall of privileging feature-length documentaries with a narrative structure.

Documentary's origins as "a medium for making sense" concern the discovery of techniques that convey information via the mediation of verbal and visual elements.

¹⁷⁵ There is no better example of this than the famous story of Porter shooting a close-up for *The Great Train Robbery* (1903)—the first in history—but being unable to find a place for it and consequently leaving it on the cutting floor.

These techniques develop across a broad range of non-fiction film (advertisement, publicity, propaganda, scientific exposition, etc).¹⁷⁶ Vertov oversaw production on a wide range of films, from short advertisements to large-scale historical compilations. Moreover, it was his habit first to attempt something in *Kino-Pravda* and then expand the experiment to longer works. The more artistic works that have earned him a place at the start of every documentary textbook were often culminations of an experiment several years in the making. Though these experiments are at times aesthetically coarse, they're invaluable for considering the question of what it was that documentary learned to say. More than any body of work that I've come across, *Kino-Pravda* shows us documentary's growing pains.

¹⁷⁶ Similarly, the historical importance of films such as *Drifters* or *Song of Ceylon* often causes us to forget that Britain's Empire Marketing Board, where John Grierson headed the film unit, was essentially a government advertisement agency. Likewise, Vertov's *Stride*, *Soviet* and *A Sixth Part of the World* were both commissioned as advertisements (the first for the Moscow City Council, the later for Sovtorgexpo).

ix. Say it again...with feeling and proper grammar.

In 1947, when Vertov wrote his *Artistic Calling Card*—a scrapbook-like catalog of his accomplishments—he was well-aware of how groundbreaking his early experiments with titling had been. Item 23 reads:

First experiments with expressive intertitles:
a) slogan titles, b) constructivist titles, c) moving titles, d) titles that don't name but rather render their subject, e) titles of light f) superimposed titles g) no titles.¹⁷⁷

The order of experiments largely follows Vertov's development as a filmmaker, a process that begins with “slogan titles.” At the end of my discussion of *The Anniversary of the Revolution*, I proposed that one paradoxical consequence of the film's verbose intertitles was the freeing of visual material from a solely illustrative function. Making the relationship between text and image a synecdoche instead of a direct translation made it possible for the text to address the spectator directly via the film's title cards.¹⁷⁸

In Vertov's work, the implied addressee becomes manifest with the introduction of agitational content into the intertitles.¹⁷⁹ Vertov first uses agitational slogans in *The Anniversary*, following the portrait gallery that concludes the film. After showing the chain of command from Lenin on down, the film concludes with two exclamatory intertitles:

¹⁷⁷ Tode, Tomas ed. *Dziga Vertov: The Vertov Collection at the Austrian Film Museum* (Vienna: Synema Publikationen, 2006), 82.

¹⁷⁸ In Walker Evans' and James Agee's seminal 1941 photo-essay *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, a similar move from illustration to integration is articulated as a statement of purpose for the work as a whole. From Agee's introduction to the work: “The photographs are not illustrative. They and the text, are coequal, mutually independent, and fully collaborative.”

¹⁷⁹ In the history of Soviet documentary, the introduction of agitation and affect into *khronika* marks the emergence of what comes is in Russian called *publizistika* (“promotional/publicity films” a maligned but influential sub-genre of documentary). In Russian a distinction exists to this day between *dokumental'niy kinematograf* and *kinopublizistika*.



Long live the Soviet Republic!

*Long live the government of the workers
and peasants!*¹⁸⁰

These slogans appear at the very end of the film. Given that early film screenings were never free of audience participation, it is not unlikely that Vertov expected the audience to cheer back at the screen upon seeing them. The slogans mark a transition from implicit to direct address, from exposition/description to an assertion. As such, these assertions represent a move beyond the “descriptive geography” (“по-описательная география”) of newsreel towards content created at the intersection of text and image.¹⁸¹

Unlike in *The Anniversary* where the slogans are a final crescendo, *Kino-Pravda* #1 begins with an intertitle that screams out at the audience: *Save the Starving Children!!!*¹⁸²

¹⁸⁰ Годовщина Революции framegrabs. Private collection.

¹⁸¹ Roshal, Дзига Вертов, 49.

¹⁸² Organizing the first issue of *Kino-Pravda* around the issue of starvation was, one suspects, *khronika*'s response to the Moscow City Council's decree, issued on April 25th, less than a month before the release of *Kino-Pravda* that during the May Day open air screenings collections for the benefit of the starving children would be organized. *Рабочая Москва*, 1922, № 66 cited in Vishnevski p. 7.



A sequence of starving children at a train yard follows. After four shots, an informational title follows and retroactively annotates what was just seen:

Railroad station "Melekes." Tormented by hunger, the children await the arrival of a sanitation train from the center.



A newsreel viewer in 1922 would have expected the above title to introduce the sequence. Why does Vertov break with convention and avoid leading with the expository title? One reason is that he perceived an ontological difference between slogans and

¹⁸³ *Kino-Pravda #1.*

¹⁸⁴ *Kino-Pravda #1.*

informational titles. Summarizing the first year of *Kino-Pravda* in an interview, Vertov explained the distinction to G. Boltianski:

In the 13th *Kino-Pravda* for the first time titles are broken into two categories: slogan titles and titles that identify location. The latter are not allowed to exist in between scenes and intrude in the *sujet*. Slogan-intertitles are seen as *sujet*, and are given as part of the general movement in accordance with the tempo of the edited pieces.¹⁸⁵

Although Vertov is speaking of a later issue here, the distinction he makes applies to *KP#1* as well. As was common for visual artists of the Russian avant-garde, Vertov often theorized his own breakthroughs post-praxis. This is what I suspect happens in the interview above. Speaking after six months of intense experimentation with the placement of titles, Vertov formulates an important distinction: information issued by the film can come either from within the film world or from outside of it.

The distinction is clear but Vertov's singling out the slogan to exemplify an organic link with the visuals is puzzling. After all, a rhetorical address such as *Save the Starving Children!!!* interprets the image to follow and is received as coming from an authorial voice external to the film. Other types of titles seem better suited to make the same point. Titles that report direct speech and are bookended by shots of the speaker would seem to be a better example of a title coming from within the world of the film. Vertov uses such titles in *Kino-Pravda#5* when showing Vasili Yakovenko's trip to Siberia. The title card reads *Vasia, sign the request!!* and splits a continuous shot of two men talking:

¹⁸⁵ Vertov, *Статьи и выступления*, 33.

Amongst *kinoks*, the word *sujet* was a compromise term that allowed them to divert charges of filming without a plan while insisting that their films can't be made in accordance with a submitted script.



The reported speech appears as an organic part of the sequence and is minimally intrusive. Why then does Vertov choose the slogan to exemplify the integration of text and *sujet*?

One answer lies in the slogan's ability to straddle the divide between information and pathos. Instead of describing, slogan titles synthesize the visual information (footage of starving children) into a pathetic appeal. Affect is transferred between text and image creating a reciprocal relationship between them. To see such reciprocity in practice, one need not look further than *KP#1* and its second slogan: *No More Strength!*



Bookended by shots of starving children gathering crumbs, *No More Strength* is both a response to mass starvation and a direct report of the orphans' experience. There is great rhetorical power in this ambiguity. Much of the sequence's impact derives from the fact that the statement *No More Strength* must be integrated with the visual to become meaningful. This is not the case with informational titles, which can stand alone as

¹⁸⁶ *Kino-Pravda #5.*

¹⁸⁷ *Kino-Pravda #1.*

propositions. Such self-sufficiency inevitably curtails the role of the visual, restricting its role to that of confirming the informational content.

A slogan rejuvenates the image by making the visual a necessary complement, contextualizing the text and giving it meaning. As with J.L. Austin's performative utterances, the slogan title requires surrounding context to be a meaningful statement. To use Austin's example, one can't simply go around naming other people's pets. A set of contextual factors—ownership of said pet—determines the performative success of the utterance.¹⁸⁸ An analogous principle is at work in Vertov's use of slogans, which similarly require context to be meaningful. The slogan's incompleteness as a stand-alone proposition and its semantic instability allow for greater reciprocity between text and image but also between image and audience.

It is perhaps worth noting that the textual instability created by slogan titles is akin to the instability that has traditionally been used to dismiss photographic images from the realm of arguments. In Roland Barthes' words, the photograph's "analogical plenitude" allowed it to be used in an infinite number of ways.¹⁸⁹ Moreover, slogan titles, by obscuring boundaries and directionality, echo the earlier argument regarding the accommodations made for vagueness in linguistic arguments.

Greater reciprocity is one answer as to why Vertov chooses "slogan titles" to exemplify text that is integrated in the newsreel's *sujet*. Vertov's move to integrate text and image in this way allows for greater emotional identification. There is also a deeper structural change at work in the way audiences interact with images. The reciprocity in

¹⁸⁸ Austin, J.L. *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; 2 edition (September 1, 1975).

¹⁸⁹ Barthes, Roland *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 18.

Vertov's titling prefigures what Bill Nichols would later describe as *vivification*, a key component of visual rhetoric. *Vivification*, for Nichols, is the capacity for:

rendering *felt* what representations only allude to. Affective ties must be forged obliquely, between viewer and representation but in relation to the historical referent. Vivification is not identical to persuasiveness, though it may be an essential part of it...Vivification is not at all similar to spectacle, though it may contribute to it. Spectacle is more properly an aborted or foreclosed form of identification where emotional engagement does not even extend as far as concern but instead remains arrested at the level of sensation.¹⁹⁰

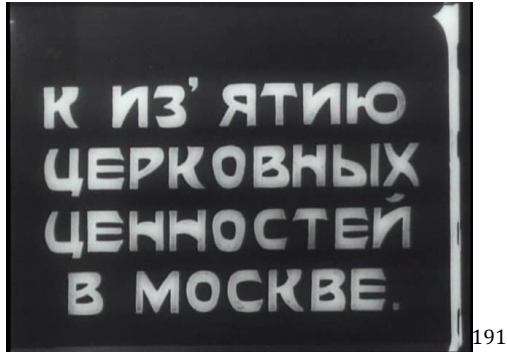
The distinction Nichols draws between spectacle and vivification is particularly applicable to a historical moment when the aesthetics of actuality—that quintessential cinema of spectacle—moved towards a new mode of filmmaking. We can see the distinction at work in *KP#1*: informational titles and slogan titles render the footage of the starving children differently. Contrary to our expectation that slogans would be associated with graphic spectacles, Nichols argues that dry factual captions, in fact, facilitate the reception of an image as a spectacle and foster an “aborted or foreclosed form of identification.” Purely factual identification, characteristic of newsreel captions, prevents the forging of affective ties. Slogans and sensationalist outcries, by contrast, create such affective ties between viewer and representation and in doing so prevent the image from remaining merely a spectacle.

In *Kino-Pravda*, affect transfer extends beyond the interaction of single image-text units and is used to unite disparate newsreel stories into a cohesive whole. The first issue of *Kino-Pravda* consists of four stories: starving children, expropriation of church valuables, the test flight of the DZ-32 aircraft from the Junkers factory, and the opening of the trial of the left S.R.’s.

At the end of the starvation sequence, another titling innovation appears:

¹⁹⁰ Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 234.

... to the expropriation of church valuables in Moscow.



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With a single letter “к” (“to”), Vertov forges a link between the first two stories, something that newsreel journals had not done before then. Signaling the transition grammatically implies that *Kino-Pravda* is a unified entity. The grammatical link prepares the ground for the thematic connection that arrives a minute later.

After a series of shots in which experts appraise the extracted church valuables, the viewer reads: *Every pearl saves a child.*



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The film cuts to a single shot of a soup kitchen where children are fed and then immediately returns to the expropriation of church valuables. Such a cut, though already common in fiction, violated the newsreel norm of keeping the stories distinct. More importantly, at this moment the reciprocity of affect extends beyond the single title-image to the larger narrative unit and interweaves the two stories together.

¹⁹¹ *Kino-Pravda* #1.

¹⁹² *Kino-Pravda* #1.

One could say that relating two distinct storylines to each other marks newsreel's transition from *agitation* to *propaganda*. “*Save the starving children!!!*” followed by horrific images is agitation—a clear and direct message. Relating the starving children to the confiscation of church valuables moves *khronika* into the realm of *propaganda* by showing a network of causal forces underpinning the story. With the shot of the soup kitchen, the viewer is made aware of an overarching logic (i.e. confiscated valuables feed the children) that unifies two seemingly unrelated events. Continuing in the direction of *propaganda*, the theme of saving the children is inserted into the aviation story that follows:

*Flights,
for the benefit of the starving,
of a German six-seater.
Junkers airplane.*



Curiously, *KP#1*'s final sequence—opening of the SR trial—is not linked to the theme of the starving children. The abandonment of what had been the issue's main theme reveals *Kino-Pravda*'s mixed allegiances. The journalistic obligation to newsworthiness and topicality necessitates the trial story, coverage of which continues in the journal's next three issues. *Kino-Pravda*'s other allegiance, exemplified by the thematic organization of the first three sequences, is to pushing the newsreel journal in a

¹⁹³ *Kino-Pravda #1*.

new direction, away from old templates. The issues that follow continue in the direction of *propaganda*, towards a thematic organization of material.

Kino-Pravda's evolution, its formal re-invention from issue to issue, presents a taxonomy of how a film's meaning changes when text and image relations are modified. Before leaving *KP-1* for good, let's once again look at the transition between the starving children and the extraction of church valuables initiated by the following:

... to the expropriation of church valuables in Moscow.

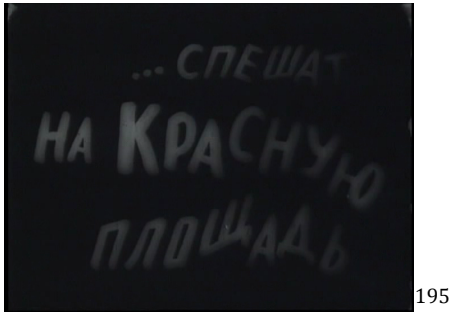


It will not be apparent to non-Russian speakers that the noun "confiscation" (изъятию) is in the dative case. This detail is extremely important. In translating the title, I've included an ellipsis (...) at the start to make explicit what is implicit for Russian speakers: the title is a fragment of a sentence, a consequent with the implied antecedent missing. Because the antecedent—*from a starving orphan...*—is absent the viewer is made to transcode the preceding visual into a linguistic proposition, to inscribe propositional content into what was first seen as a visual record.

The use of images to fulfill grammatical expectations is an experiment particularly well suited to inflected languages (i.e. languages in which nouns and adjectives reflect case). A marked case sets up an expectation, creating a tension to be

¹⁹⁴ *Kino-Pravda* #1.

resolved. *Kino-Pravda* uses this to great effect. Issue thirteen, for example, begins with a title that omits the sentence's subject, replacing it with an ellipsis. ... *hurries to the Red Square*



The snaking orthography imitates a procession and the title is followed by a shot of a crowd gathering at the Red Square. Seeing such a fragmentary title, the spectator forges a text-image unit. The technique was common to agit-posters, which often omitted a grammatical subject and forced the spectators to inscribe themselves into the proposition by completing the phrase. In the same issue of *Kino-Pravda* the technique is on display: ...*pledge to die for the republic.*



The implied first person plural ("we") is absent but implied via an image of soldiers making an oath. Like slogans, fragmentary titles require a visual complement in order to

¹⁹⁵ *Kino-Pravda* #13.

¹⁹⁶ *Kino-Pravda* #13.

be meaningful. But whereas a slogan *Save the Starving Children!!* relies on the image to ground it semantically, the dependency is heightened with the use of grammatical fragments as the image comes to function both at the level of semantics and syntax.

At a basic level, the use of images to complete linguistic fragments avoids needless repetition. The use of images as linguistic substitutes prevents the redundancy Kracauer diagnosed in excessive voice-over. Minimizing text was especially important for Soviet newsreel producers; illiteracy and, crucially, rampant semi-literacy, made long explanatory titles ineffective. Recognizing the prevalence of semi-literacy—common to all societies with high illiteracy rates—suggests that grammatical fragments served as effective aids for those just learning to read.

The drive to minimize *khronika's* verbosity without diminishing its commitment to comprehensibility in its delivery of information evokes interesting parallels with the early experiments of Claude Shannon, the so-called “father of information theory.” In his “Mathematical Theory of Communication,” Shannons consider the use of modulation to reduce quantized speech to the smallest quantities that could be reproduced by a flip-flop circuit.¹⁹⁷ Surprised to discover how far speech can be degraded and still remain intelligible, Shannon understood that the rest of the signal was, in fact, redundant.¹⁹⁸

Above, I describe slogan titles as less stable than their informational counterparts. For Shannon, such uncertainty was the central measure of the amount of information conveyed. But Shannon was not interested in the semantic aspects of communication or

¹⁹⁷ Shannon, Claude “A Mathematical Theory of Communication” *The Bell System Technical Journal*, Vol. 27, (July-October 1948) 379–423, 623–656. Accessed 08/12/12 at <http://cm.bell-labs.com/cm/ms/what/shannonday/shannon1948.pdf>

¹⁹⁸ For more on this see Gleick, James *The Information* Ch. 8 - “The Informational Turn.” Ebook.

in anything he deemed "irrelevant to the engineering problem."¹⁹⁹ In Shannon's original writing, the notion of information is divorced from semantics and focuses strictly on the structural properties of the message, which Shannon adapts from stochastic processes in astrophysics. Yet as James Gleick has recently suggested the connection between uncertainty and information can be extended to semantics as well:

Uncertainty, in turn, can be measured by counting the number of possible messages. If only one message is possible, there is no uncertainty and thus no information. Some messages may be likelier than others, and information implies surprise. Surprise is a way of talking about probabilities. If the letter following t (in English) is h , not so much information is conveyed because the probability of h was relatively high.²⁰⁰

I cite Gleick's summary because I believe it is better suited to a discussion of *khronika*.

Gleick projects a human agent into Shannon's model, an agent that must make a prediction about the letter to follow. The newsreel viewer behaves in much the same way when confronted with a fragment. By decreasing the amount of verbal information in the title cards and eliminating the text's self-sufficiency, *Kino-Pravda* increases, according to Shannon's theory, the informational content of the sequence as a whole.²⁰¹ The increase in information occurs when a spectator is activated into completing the linguistic statement and is made to actualize links implied by the proposition.

In the example above, the viewer mentally revisits the image of the crying child and uses it to fill the gap left by "...to the extraction of church valuables." Alternately, with "...was hurrying to the Red Square," the viewer reads the image of a crowd as the missing subject in the preceding title card. In these two examples, the direction in which

¹⁹⁹ Shannon, Claude "A Mathematical Theory of Communication," 379.

²⁰⁰ Gleick, *The Information*, Ch. 8 ePUB book.

²⁰¹ There are also other, more familiar, options on this argument such as Iser's writing on productive interpretive gaps or Yuri Lotman's writing on transcoding, both of which see meaning production in similar processes.

the viewer assigns reference is clear. This would not be the case for long; the instability of the titles would only increase in future issues, as would the total amount of information conveyed.

Kino-Pravda #13, the fifth anniversary issue advertised in *Kino-Fot*, ends with a section titled *Five Years of Struggle*. Using iconic bits of *khronika* from the preceding years, such as the images of starving children from *KP#1*, the lengthy sequence charts the progress made by the Soviet government. The summary of the fourth year, 1921, appears below.²⁰²



²⁰² I include the shot of Trotsky that precedes the “1921” title card to indicate that the individual sequences are made to overlap across years, a technique that enhances the symbolic power of motion pictures and destabilizes the early non-fiction tendency to think of motion pictures as limited to a specific time and place.

²⁰³ *Kino-Pravda #13*.

The text card is made up of one word: the noun *effort* in the genitive plural. As before, the incomplete sentence must be supplemented with the image in order to be a meaningful proposition about the myriad efforts undertaken. After seeing shots of a snowy Civil War battle and of Leon Trotsky working at his desk, the spectator synthesizes the two images and produces a linguistic equivalent, one that adequately complements the genitive inflection of *efforts*. The effect is deeply propagandistic as the grammatical inflection works to unite military, political, and physical labor under the same rubric.

Ideologically boilerplate, the sequence is formally ingenious in its cross-cutting to transition between military activity and the work of governance. Early uses of cross-cutting or parallel editing, as in D.W.Griffith's *Lonedale Operator* (1911), established suspense by transitioning between several lines of action presumed to occur at the same time.



The suspense is predicated on the simultaneity of the events; *Operator* cuts between a frightened girl who has locked herself in a telegraph room, the robbers trying to break in, and the posse coming to her rescue.

The *efforts* sequence in *KP#13* similarly begins under the rubric of shared time. The viewer first watches the footage as a protocol of events that occurred in 1921. The appearance of *...efforts*, however, catalyzes a mental re-view of the material just seen. In

²⁰⁴ *Lonedale Operator* (1911). Framegrabs. DVD: Treasures from American Film Arcives: Encore Edition.

order to complete the textual fragment the spectator retroactively joins the images of governance and those of active combat under the rubric of *efforts*.²⁰⁵ Such a re-view increases not only the spectator's engagement but also the informational density of the material. In fact, the sequence proceeds as an illustration of the *two claims hypothesis*. The images are first seen as historical records and then mentally reviewed and categorized in accordance with the title ...*efforts*.

This *syllapsistic* ability of footage to exist both as literal record and as argument is an integral part of viewing *KP#13*. Following the title...*efforts*, there is an extended sequence that documents the construction of a new bridge. Even though the image-text unit was consummated by joining *efforts* with images of Trotsky and the military, an implicit porousness remains in place. The possibility of additional *efforts* is there still; the shadow of the title lingers over the material. The shots to come can't help but be seen under the general rubric introduced moments earlier.

At first, the shots of workers in a lumberyard are seen as examples of additional war *efforts*. But, as the sequence continues, an inkling of doubt creeps in. Perhaps this is a new sequence and its only connection to the preceding is temporal—it too occurred in 1921. As the lumberyard/reconstruction sequence moves forward, the influence of the title wanes and the material's status as record returns to the forefront. As I've been arguing, destabilizing the title-image relationship makes the viewer's vacillation between the two modes possible. And if Shannon's model is applicable to newsreel, such vacillation increases the amount of information conveyed by the sequence.

²⁰⁵ It is possible that Vertov is picking up on formalist paradigmatic/syntagmatic categorizations prevalent at the time. The sequence begins syntagmatically (historical, diachronic) but is then gathered up *paradigmatically* by “efforts.” This moment foreshadows some of the cataloguing gestures of *A Sixth Part of the World* and *The Man with the Movie Camera*.

The fluctuation between an event's record and its symbolic meaning is apparent in the next issue (*KP#14*) and its rendering of Lenin's speech at the 4th World Congress of the Comintern. The coverage of the congress begins with an extended scene of delegates in action, that is, speaking at the podium. Predictably, the sequence culminates with Lenin's speech. His appearance is prefaced by one of Vertov's earliest meta-filmic gestures: a shot of a camera operator cranking the camera together with a transparency title with the conjunction *and*. The shot signals that the best was saved for last.



Beginning with a conjunction (*and*) primes the viewer for a grammatical reading of the scene ahead. What makes the scene meta-filmic and self-aware is not simply the presence of the camera but the use of a verbal conjunction over a transition shot. Putting a verbal inflection on a visual transition primes the viewer to see the cut as a grammatical transition. The visual build-up and the suggestion of aggregation are both representative of the scene to come.

²⁰⁶ *Kino-Pravda #14*.

Unlike the presentation of earlier speeches, which introduced the speaker with a title card, Lenin's scene begins with a reaction shot, the affect of the applause carrying over to the next title: *Lenin*. At the outset, the scene presents a familiar shot-countershot pattern. There is a presumption of spatial and temporal continuity. Lenin makes a speech. The audience reacts enthusiastically to it. The speech and the applause are assumed to take place in the same space and at the same time. As the sequence continues, the visual links that signal spatial and temporal continuity disappear while the grammatical structures remain in place.

Soon after the speech, the shot of the camera operator repeats but the second time around the title receives an extra letter, signaling the dative case (*to/for Lenin*):



Immediately after *to Lenin*, the scene moves outside. The dative case dictates that the crowd outside cheers in response to Lenin and his speech. But instead of the space of the

²⁰⁷ *Kino-Pravda #14*.

auditorium, it is the grammar of the proposition that now links the cheering outside and the speech inside. It bears repeating that one is never certain in moments such as this. Any moment, the text's grammatical control can be relinquished in favor of spatial relations. And this is in fact what we see next. Lenin reappears again but this time he is not on the podium but in the crowd, mingling with the masses.

Having established, visually and grammatically, that the cheering crowds, wherever they may be, are responding to Lenin, *Kino-Pravda* takes another step towards greater nominalism and abstraction. After the cheering, we see several army units in military formation. The response *to Lenin* thus expands to include the performance of civic duties and military obligations. While Svilova edits the shot angles to suggest a shot/countershot pattern, the spatial and temporal contiguity loses ground to the overarching theme: activities done for Lenin. The result is a strained overlapping of spatial and rhetorical continuity.

Pushing the lesson one step further, Vertov eliminates the possibility of spatial contiguity leaving only an intellectual link in place:



The title card is once again in the dative case and is bi-directional: reinforcing the title's phantom extension over the military display just seen and looking ahead to the next shot. What follows, unexpectedly, is a shot of a steam plough tilling the soil. The scope of the message expands once again to become: agricultural work done *for Lenin*.

²⁰⁸ *Kino-Pravda* #14.

At this moment, rhetorical continuity ousts spatial continuity completely. As we've seen, the groundwork for such a reversal was the initial alignment of spatial and grammatical relations and their redundancy. At the outset, spatio-temporal relations determined shot transitions. The title *Lenin* identified the subject but did not steer the articulation of the images to come. For the second iteration, Vertov uses the thematic similarity of the footage (people cheering) to suggest a metonymic connection between two spaces: outside and inside. Simultaneously, he uses the dative case to introduce the general theme and matches it with a grammatic inflection: activities done *for Lenin*. The audience's reaction to a speech inside an auditorium becomes a bridge to the more abstract reactions. The viewer's participation increases, culminating with the viewer positing a causal link between agricultural production and Lenin's speech. The relation between images becomes purely intellectual, determined solely by the grammatical extension of the title and by the mental activity of the viewer. Over the course of this sequence, Vertov moves the viewer from the formal language of fiction to a new, rhetorically grounded language of documentary.

The viewer's increased participation in making meaning of this sequence demonstrates Vertov's belief that a spectator learns to see anew over the course of a film. This idea will be a staple of Vertov's work for years to come, culminating with *The Man With the Movie Camera* in which each of the film's six reels is more difficult than the previous, an evolution based on the visual lessons taught by the film. As in the sequence above, the viewer becomes increasingly active in the production of meaning.

The multiple-shot sequence showing the steam plough from different angles and scales ends on a close-up of the steam whistle. It is immediately followed by one shot of a steam ship, several shots of a steam locomotive, and a shot of a smokestack.



While the visual motif of steam/smoke is apparent, the meaning of the sequence is incomprehensible until the viewer recalls that like the cheering, the steam plough was *for Lenin*. Deciphering the sequence, but now without the prompt of the intertitle, the viewer must provide the bridge between the four images of steam technology and mentally conclude that Soviet industry works *for Lenin* and to actualize the ideas of Leninism.

In just over two minutes of screen time, a new spectator emerges. This new spectator is capable of abstracting from the here-and-now of the image, to seeing the world as linguistically-articulated, regardless of whether a text card is in the immediate vicinity. In this one sequence, Vertov models the transition from one form of spectatorship to another, from a passive recipient of information and illustration to an interactive participant involved in inscribing propositional content into the footage. In this new type of *khronika*, historical principles and ideological theses grow out of the footage and are consummated by a dialogue between spectator and screen.

The idea that Soviet Russia, its politicians, demonstrators, military, agricultural, and industrial sectors, all work *for Lenin* is never stated outright in *KP#14*. The abstract conclusion is never stated verbally, that is. No title card connects the dots and proclaims:

²⁰⁹ *Kino-Pravda #14*.

all for Lenin. On the contrary, the viewer reaches this conclusion through gradual abstraction. The political theses grow out of the sequencing of images. The mental march towards this conclusion is inseparable from the film's visuals, which gradually accrue symbolic value. A crowd gathering in December of 1922 expands to become many crowds, a military march, a steam plough, other machines, all before culminating with a nominal depiction of the country's industrial base as a whole. Each of the shots is as photographically precise as the one before but gradually the viewer comes to see them differently.

Looking at the sequence in such close detail reveals something distinct about meaning making in documentary: movement towards linguistic articulation is always in flux. The symbolism of a steam plough recedes over time. The shots are temporarily seen as records of an individual event and are then transformed into a different symbol altogether. The propositional domain shifts over the course of the sequence. This semiotic impermanence has not been sufficiently analyzed by the theorists of documentary, then and now. Thus, before looking at the earliest Soviet attempts to theorize *khronika*, I would like to consider the ways in which the idea of a *documentary proposition* has been approached in the critical literature.

x. Two claims, one proposition, and the mystery of co-existence.

Thus far, I have pursued two lines of argument: historical and theoretical. The historical argument focused on how the development of non-fiction film in Soviet Russia transcended the templates of newsreel journals and historical compilations by integrating verbal and visual elements through shared affect and grammar. Building from the initial use of slogan titles, I've suggested that *Kino-Pravda* worked to develop a text-image unit, a multimedia speech act predicated on greater parity between the verbal and visual elements.

The theoretical argument addressed the emergence of documentary as a medium for making sense by taking up the *two claims hypothesis*—a consensus view that distinguished documentary from its predecessors by its ability to simultaneously present visual records and interpretations of them. Documentary's interpretive component involves a rhetorical response by the viewer, who inscribes propositional content into the image. Presumption of such interactivity introduces a communication theory framework, distinguishing the film as sender, the viewer as recipient, and the unity of evidence and discourse as the consummation of a successful exchange.

While useful for thinking about efficiency in the image-text unit, in all of the ways described, the communication theory framework is in other ways limiting because of its tendency to isolate a stable basic unit of transferred meaning, an analogue of the *bit* that Claude Shannon develops in his theory of communication. The assumption of such a base unit has led numerous documentary theorists to articulate—directly and indirectly—an analogue of the *bit*, a proposition that combines the two claims into a single entity. The search for a base informational unit consisting of two claims is particularly resonant

today because it promises an alternative to the *word* or the *morpheme*, an alternative suited to an age when the hegemony of the verbal is increasingly under review.

Attempts to pinpoint a base unit of documentary meaning have been varied. Michael Renov, a leading documentary scholar, has suggested that the basic documentary proposition is a constant re-confirmation of the material's origins in the real world. Renov writes:

The documentary “truth claim” (which says, at the very least: “Believe me, I’m of the world”) is the baseline of persuasion for all of non-fiction, from propaganda to rock doc.²¹⁰

At first glance, Renov’s blanket “baseline of persuasion” appears plausible and appeals to our everyday experience of non-fiction film. Digging a little deeper, however, we see that Renov's *proposition* is rife with problems.

There are two ways of understanding Renov's proposition *believe me, I'm of the world*. One could see it as a generic appeal to our baseline faith in the photographic image. I very much doubt that this is what Renov means, as it says nothing specific about documentary as such. The second alternative, and what I believe Renov has in mind, is that documentary's “truth claim” signifies that the image is representative of a given historical reality. If this is indeed what Renov has in mind, then other issues arise immediately, the main one being the proposition's apparent insensitivity to documentary's different modes of representation.

Linking documentary's baseline proposition with the shot's particular historical reality traps one into thinking in terms of physical representation. It is

²¹⁰ Renov, Michael “Toward a Poetics of Documentary” in Renov, Michael ed. *Theorizing the Documentary* (London, UK: Routledge, 1993), 30.

not altogether clear whether this physical realism can accommodate the use of documentary images to depict nominally. This concern may appear as simply theoretical until one tries to apply Renov's proposition to films such as Peter Watkins' *The War Game* (1965), a hypothetical consideration of nuclear war or Erroll Morris' *The Thin Blue Line* (1988). Predicated on a production-based definition of documentary—the footage is real—Renov's alternative is insufficient for conceptualizing documentary as a medium. The limitations of Renov's approach have been recently confirmed by the widespread scholarly shift to reception-based definitions of documentary.

Like Renov, Bill Nichols struggles to define documentary's baseline proposition.

He considers several alternatives, beginning with:

“This is so, isn't it?” is the gist of the most common and fundamental proposition we find. It is the basic proposition made by realism. This question, as much or more than Louis Althusser's “Hey, you there!” is the basis for the social construction of reality and for the work of ideology.²¹¹

Nichols is right to note that such a proposition is too broad to encompass any of the medium's specificity. While such a proposition is present in our experience of documentary, it does not sufficiently differentiate the propositional quality of documentary from the analogue at work in realist fiction. With this concern in mind,

Nichols subdivides documentary's basic claim into three possible propositions:

In documentary what “is so” is a representation of the world, and the question, “isn't it?” has to do with the credibility of the representation. This representation can be either a re-presentation of overt propositions made *in* the historical world – the record of public speeches such as we find in *Triumph of the Will*; the representation of case or argument *about* the world such as the claim that “This is the battle of china” mentioned above; or of perspective propositions about the world made obliquely or indirectly by the way in which actions and events are represented.²¹²

²¹¹ Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 114.

²¹² Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 114.

Nichols implies that the question mark at the end of “this is so, isn’t it?” concerns an image’s credibility. To my mind, it is more of a rhetorical question. It functions less as a question and more as a reminder that the image should be read as signifying beyond its concrete moment. Questions of credibility do come into play, of course, but they are higher-order questions, based on more complex film structures, and therefore, do not help with respect to a basic proposition.

Having made a caveat about the assumptions that documentary shares with realism, Nichols offers three candidates for a uniquely documentary proposition:

- 1) a record of a proposition delivered in the world
- 2) a proposition, typically linguistic, delivered by the film about its source material
- 3) a perspectival proposition.

Of the three, the third alternative, that of a *perspectival proposition*, strikes me as the most viable and also the one most in need of further clarification. I explore it in some detail below. Before doing so, I would like to briefly discuss the other two alternatives proposed.

The first suggestion—that a documentary can re-present a proposition made in the real world—is at odds with the *two claims hypothesis*, which Nichols endorses. The impossibility of a one-to-one relationship between the documentary and the world is the lesson taught by compilation filmmakers such as Esfir Shub, Emile de Antonio, and Johan Grimmonprez. These filmmakers delight in using film to subvert propositions made in the real world. Because the two claims are heterogeneous, a true transcription is not possible. In de Antonio’s *Millhouse* (1971), for example, the viewer is repeatedly made aware of the mendacious nature of Nixon’s public statements. When the film presents Nixon’s propositions as records made in the historical world, these propositions do not

compete or clash with the statement made by the film about those statements (i.e. Nixon prevaricates). The two statements belong to parallel, heterogeneous structures that cannot intersect because the forms of their meaning are not the same. Nixon's proposition is not weaker than the film's, it is just that the former is a record of an event, and the latter – its interpretation. There is no possibility of a contest.

What does happen frequently in documentaries, and I suspect that this is what Nichols has in mind, is that the film bestows authority on a proposition delivered in the real world, giving it the cachet of truth. In other words, the film endorses the proposition delivered on screen as valid. This is typically the way that documentaries introduce interview subjects, emphasizing through setting, gestures, and lighting, the subject's reliability or lack thereof. While it is necessary to recognize that a documentary film engages mouthpieces for its rhetorical ends, one must resist suggesting a direct one-to-one transcription. Though less intuitive, it is more precise to say that a recorded occurrence is transformed into a *documentary proposition* by a combination of editing, context, framing, composition, etc. Nichols' own model of documentary evidence offers a good explanation of why this has to be the case.

With his second alternative, Nichols tries to address the way in which documentaries use language to create a propositional reading of an image. The example he cites is the opening of Frank Capra's *The Battle of China*, an installment in the *Why We Fight* series. Heard over black leader, Walter Huston's pronouncement "*This is the Battle of China!*" ushers us into the world of the film and allows the representations to coalesce around the idea of this event. It may not be clear why this example is substantively different than the use of title cards in an early war compilation. The

difference, Nichols explains, is that the presence of a more active voice, links informational exposition with an external thinking subject:

In most documentaries, we are asked to realize that the world we see is one conjured for a purpose and that this purpose is made manifest to us through the agency of an external authority.²¹³

Thus, the pronouncement “This is the battle of China!” is important not as a verbal proposition but as an indicator of the film’s expository agency. For Nichols, Huston's voice is the catalyst that produces a rhetorical response in the viewer. The recognition of an external authority is part and parcel of Nichols' reception-based definition of documentary. Yet given that our recognition of expository agency often results from the way a film has been indexed, I believe it is best to treat moments that trigger the spectator’s rhetorical response as pre-conditions rather than as documentary propositions proper. Put another way, the fact of recognizing an "external authority" does not yet elucidate anything about the co-existence of the two claims within the proposition.

This brings me to the third alternative: *the perspectival proposition*. In *Representing Reality*, Nichols introduces perspectival propositions as an *et al* of sorts. The concept is intended to cover direct cinema, cinéma vérité, ethnographic film and other less overtly rhetorical forms of non-fiction. Perspectival propositions, unlike direct statements, “are made obliquely or indirectly by the way in which actions or events are represented.”²¹⁴ As a result, the notion of a *perspectival proposition* is not fleshed out as a concept and seems intended to pre-empt complaints about the exclusion of certain types of documentary.

²¹³ Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 113.

²¹⁴ Nichols, *Representing Reality* 114.

Given his interest in rhetoric, Nichols often tries to pre-empt criticisms that his concepts, including the influential four modes of documentary, pay excessive attention to the argumentative side of documentary. In fact, Nichols' entire discussion of perspectival propositions (or tacit perspectives) is limited to the following parenthetical aside:

Examples of a tacit perspective include the films of Fred Wiseman, the impressionistic memory of the Vietnam War given by *Dear America*, and the ironic tonalities of Bunuel's *Land Without Bread*. Although, there is a referentiality about these representations that anchors them to the historical world, they are by no means free of constructedness. They are, however, propositions somewhat distinct from those introduced by the text itself where the representation of the world serves as evidence for an argument that did not entirely predate the text.²¹⁵

The gulf that separates Bunuel's *Las Hurdes* and Wiseman's *High School* makes it clear that perspectival proposition are for Nichols a way of maintaining breadth while holding on to a model of documentary evidence that is both separate from and a participant in a discursive loop ("they are by no means free of constructedness").

Although Nichols does not consider it in sufficient detail, the notion of a perspectival proposition is a useful starting point for thinking about a proposition that mediates between the two claims. I would argue that a documentary proposition is the assertion of a perspective on a photographic referent. What comes to be regarded as true in documentary is the immanence of a perspective, revealing its evidentiary origins and supplementing them with propositional content at the same time. In documentary, as in photography, the denotation of an image, our acceptance of its real world relationship to a referent, naturalizes the symbolic meaning imposed by the proposition, giving the imposed perspective an aura of fact.²¹⁶

²¹⁵ Nichols, *Representing Reality* 114.

²¹⁶ To my mind, this is the most salient of the numerous insights in Roland Barthes' essay "The Rhetoric of the Image."

As I understand it, a perspectival proposition is the result of two conditions. The first one is a warranting condition – it makes the uptake of information possible. As Edward Branigan puts it, this condition produces a “method or procedure for making decisions about assigning reference.”²¹⁷ In documentary film, this is the factor that catalyzes the viewer's rhetorical response. This can happen by virtue of a film being indexed as a documentary by its makers, distributors, exhibitors, etc. Otherwise, as we just saw in *The Battle of China*, an explicit expository gesture can similarly fulfill this warranting condition.

The second condition is constitutive – it concerns the use of film techniques to trigger the oscillation between the two claims. While these two conditions make the articulation of a perspective possible, describing what exactly a *perspectival proposition* is, presents more of a challenge. The difficulty stems, in large part, from the common sense notion that after seeing a documentary one walks away with a specific perspective on a social issue (hydraulic fracking), phenomenon (prison beauty pageants), or person (Richard Nixon). Given that this general perspective builds up over the film's running time, it seems intuitive to conclude that the overall perspective is the accumulation of smaller perspectives offered throughout the film.

Some connection indisputably exists between perspectives large and small. Relating them arithmetically, however, traps one into thinking about perspectival propositions as fixed stable units of meaning, as propositions in a logical sense. Yet as discussed earlier, doing so is counterproductive—serious consideration of visual rhetoric and visual arguments is rendered futile by the imposition of an impossibly high standard (i.e. that of formal logic).

²¹⁷ Branigan, Edward *Narrative Comprehension and Film* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 193.

A perspectival proposition, I argue, is then best understood not as a statement but as a form of aspect perception over time. This definition combines two concepts: aspect perception and propositional content over time. In the essay "The Rhetoric of The Image" Roland Barthes introduces the concepts of "anchorage" and "relay" to describe the possible relations that exist between text and image. And with *anchorage* Barthes thoroughly addresses the question he sets out to answer: "What is the signifying structure of an illustration?"²¹⁸ Turning to the *relay*—a more co-operative relationship—Barthes makes only brief mention saying that it is rare in the fixed image but is very important in film. But then he dodges the issue a bit and concludes that "the unity of the message is realized at a higher level." But, as we've already seen, the integration of text and moving image is also realized at a lower level at the level of individual shots and sequences.

I describe perspective in documentary as a form of *aspect perception*, a term I adapt from Ludwig Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein's discussion of aspect, unpacks what Barthes does not with respect to *relay*: how the co-operation of heterogeneous structures impacts overall meaning. To give greater clarity to the definition of perspectival propositions that I've offered, I will end this section by discussing two philosophical attempts to relate vision to questions of meaning. In their own way, these attempts grapple with the co-existence of verbal and visual meaning, with the co-operation of the two claims. First, I consider Wittgenstein's account of aspect perception, significant for its description of the co-existence of *seeing* and *seeing as*. Second, I introduce C.S. Peirce's theory of meaning. Peirce's semiotic, and in particular the *index*, has become a mainstay of film writing today. My interest in Peirce's work, however, is driven by the fact that his theory attempts to model our pre-linguistic relation with things. In this way,

²¹⁸ Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, 38.

Peirce's semiotic offers both a model of *film meaning* and provides an essential point of contrast with a theory of meaning based on linguistic or logical propositions.

It may appear odd to start a discussion of what it means for documentary's two claims to co-exist with Wittgenstein's account of aspect-dawning experiences, and the famous duck-rabbit *Kippbild*. After all, "seeing as", the phrase Wittgenstein uses to describe Jastrow's *Kippbild* suggests a disjunction: duck or rabbit. One or the other. This understanding of aspect perception is common but it is misleading as it disregards that in *The Philosophical Investigations* multi-stable figures such as the duck-rabbit are used as transitions. The multi-stable figure for Wittgenstein are a gateway to a broader discussion of visual *impressions* and *materializations*, the latter being *impressions* that have been schematized by the subject.

For Wittgenstein, noticing of an aspect amounts to a split in perception. As he often does in *The Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein introduces aspects by zeroing in on an inconsistency in our everyday use of a particular word. In this case, his target is the verb *to see*:

The one: 'What do you see there?' – 'I see this' (and then a description, a drawing, a copy). The other: 'I see a likeness between these two faces – let the man I tell this to be seeing the faces as clearly as I do myself. The importance of this is the difference of category between the two objects of sight.'²¹⁹

Whereas the first type of sight is a record of the object in the world, the second imposes a relationship or, as Wittgenstein puts it, an interpretation. As should be apparent, the two senses of *see* are concerned with physical identification and nominal interpretation, and correspond to the two claims made by documentary.

²¹⁹ Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Philosophical Investigations* (London,UK: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), xi/165.

Wittgenstein is sensitive to the fact that the objects of *seeing* and of *seeing as* are, like the two claims, heterogeneous. His sensitivity to heterogeneity comes across most clearly in his repeated attempts to distinguish perception as such from aspect perception. He states directly that “ ‘seeing as’ is not part of perception’ ” and advises that “you should not put organization of a visual impression [materialization] on a level with colours and shapes [impression].”²²⁰ *Materializations* are structured *impressions* and are a form of *seeing as*. Yet the exact nature of the relationship between *seeing* and *seeing as* continues to elude Wittgenstein.

Wittgenstein introduces the *Kippbild* and the changing of an aspect in an attempt to address the cognitive dissonance inherent in moving from *seeing* to *seeing as*:

The expression of a change of aspect is the expression of a *new* perception and at the same time of the perception’s being unchanged.²²¹

Stephen Mulhall, writing on aspect perception in Wittgenstein and Heidegger, explains that the source of this dissonance is a split in the image. He writes:

As in all aspect-dawning experiences, one feels that a separation between concept and object has been effected, one has a heightened awareness of the conceptual framework one can impose upon that object.²²²

This "heightened awareness" of the separation between object and concept is an intuition of heterogeneity, the awareness of a single message splintering into an *impression* and its *materialization*.

The difficulty Wittgenstein has in articulating the difference between *seeing* and *seeing as* stems from the need to describe their interaction. He is cautious not to posit direct causal links between *impression* and *materialization*. While the two co-exist and

²²⁰ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 168

²²¹ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 167.

²²² Mulhall, Stephen *On Being in the World: Wittgenstein and Heidegger on seeing aspects*. (New York: Routledge, 1990), 55-56.

are “intimately connected” it is not correct to say that the *impression* determines the *materialization*.²²³ It may, but it need not. Think back to the news editor selecting a crowd cutaway. The particular physiology of the person in the shot may make the shot a good fit rhetorically. At the same time, a correspondence with previous shots, a particular alignment of camera angle and facial expression, or the product of any number of montage factors are all just as likely to account for the cutaway’s rhetorical success.

Instead of positing a direct causal link from *impression* to *materialization* Wittgenstein suggests that an “intimate connection” exists between the two. Each shot enters into a new and ever-shifting relationship with its propositional articulation. The recognition of a new relationship is what Wittgenstein describes as the “dawning of an aspect.” The instability or multi-stability of aspects shows not only that aspects cannot be directly translated into propositions but, crucially, that aspects strive towards propositional content, take certain structural properties, but never fully attain propositional status. They do not become properly formed thoughts or statements, only their “echoes”:

What I perceive in the dawning of an aspect is not a property of the object, but an internal relation between it and other objects...It is almost as if “seeing the sign in this context’ were an echo of a thought. “The echo of a thought in sight” one would like to say.²²⁴

This paragraph gives the clearest picture of aspects as partially propositional. While an aspect is not a fully formed thought or proposition—just its echo—it relates to the “internal relations with other objects” and in this way akin to a linguistic proposition. As with words, the internal relation between objects implies abstracting from the particular object for the purpose of nominal categorization. To say that an aspect is relational means

²²³ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 169.

²²⁴ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 212.

that perceiving an object under a certain aspect involves a shift towards the nominal. To show how this shift towards nominalization occurs in practice, Wittgenstein describes looking at a scribble resembling the letter H. Considering the scribble, Wittgenstein goes through several possibilities (a properly written letter of a foreign alphabet, a child's handwriting, a flourish on an official signature). The experience of weighing each alternative, Wittgenstein concludes, has a "close kinship with experiencing the meaning of a word."²²⁵

To sum up, Wittgenstein's discussion of aspects offers a model for thinking about the relationship between visual perspective and linguistic meaning. Like perspectival propositions, aspects are rhetorical. Our experience of them, involves cognitive dissonance born of a split between the representation and its linguistic articulation, or, as Mulhall puts it, between object and concept. At the same time, the difficulty posed by the notion of an "intimate connection" between *impressions* and *materialization*, points to an essential difference between perspectival and linguistic meaning, between an image being articulated as language and a linguistic proposition as such. Applied to documentary, Wittgenstein's marvelous "echo of a thought in sight" describes a perspectival proposition that is almost nominal, striving for propositional content but never being able to attain it due to its co-existence with the impression as such. A documentary proposition articulates a salient perspective that is received as a directed assertion but the persistence of physical representation prevents the proposition from becoming fully nominal.

Wittgenstein's discussion of aspects is invaluable for its ability to demonstrate the kinship between linguistic meaning and visual perspective. *The Philosophical Investigations* are, however, of limited use—struggling with important questions but

²²⁵ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 221.

going no further—when it comes to answering how the co-existence of verbal and visual articulations, and the resultant semi-propositional status of their union, impacts the meaning conveyed. This question is central for understanding documentary's origins and for questions of meaning in film more generally.

According to the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, cinema is the site where one comes across “the most complete examples of the disjunction between seeing and speaking.”²²⁶ Contrary to Metz, Deleuze claims, “there is no link that could move from the visible to the statement, or from the statement to the visible.” Wittgenstein would most likely agree and allude to an “intimate connection” that persists between them. Instead of showing us the complete “disjunction” of verbal and visual, the notion of a *perspectival proposition* in documentary gives us something equally interesting, *the incomplete conjunction*, a failed attempt to render perspective truly propositional. Both the total disjunction and the near conjunction stem from the incommensurability of the two claims, and our inability to describe their interaction in causal terms. As Deleuze so beautifully puts it, “there is a continual relinking which takes place over the irrational break or crack.”²²⁷ To understand what Deleuze means by this continual relinking, we must first turn to C.S. Peirce's semiotic, which offers a taxonomy of the possible relationships between a sign and its object.²²⁸

To describe a sign's relationship to an object, Peirce relies on two separate sets of triads. The first set, *referent/representamen/interpretant*, is often overlooked; the bulk of

²²⁶ Deleuze, Gilles *Foucault* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006), 83.

²²⁷ Deleuze, *Foucault*, 83.

²²⁸ Peirce's theory of signs is typically broken up into an Early Account (1867-68), an Interim Account (1903), and the Final Account (1906-8). While the terms changed over time, becoming both more precise and inscrutable in the later writings, the overarching structural elements of his model remained consistent.

critical attention has been directed at the famous *icon/index/symbol*. But, as will soon be clear, there are significant reasons to keep both sets of terms in mind when thinking about documentary. For Peirce, any sign that stands for an object (*referent*) is called a *representamen*. The *representamen* is not passive; its nature is rhetorical: “it addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign.”²²⁹ The equivalent sign created in the subject is called the *interpretant*. The term is somewhat misleading causing many to assume that *interpretant* refers to a subject. For Peirce, the *interpretant* is a mental representation, a schematized translation of the *representamen* that relates to the same *referent* out in the real world. The *representamen* determines the *interpretant* but, as with Wittgenstein’s “intimate connection”, the determination is not causal. Peirce scholar Albert Atkin offers a cogent definition of what non-causal determination entails. The *representamen* “determines an *interpretant* by using certain features of the way the sign signifies its object to generate and shape our understanding.”²³⁰

The *representamen* may serve as the direct address that produces the *interpretant* but the two are not identical. The *interpretant* is determined by the *representamen* but, as the name suggests, it also interprets or translates the latter to create a “more complex understanding of the sign’s object.”²³¹ The nature of a sign's complexity refers to Peirce's second triad, which describes the sign's structure as an icon, an index, or a symbol.

²²⁹ Peirce, Charles *Collected Papers Vol. 3*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), 52.

²³⁰ Atkin, Albert, "Peirce's Theory of Signs", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2010 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.) Accessed 08/12/12 at <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2010/entries/peirce-semiotics>.

²³¹ Atkin, Albert, "Peirce's Theory of Signs," Accessed 08/12/12 at <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2010/entries/peirce-semiotics>.

Peirce's semiotic is important for the study of early documentary because his theory of meaning is pre-linguistic. According to Umberto Eco, Peirce is unique in this:

...the statement *Snow is white* is true if the snow is white, but how we realize (and are sure) that snow is white is delegated to a theory of perception or to optics. Beyond a doubt the only person who made this problem the very foundation of his theory – semiotic, cognitive, and metaphysical all at the same time – was Peirce.²³²

The pre-linguistic focus of Peirce's philosophy gives it a special kinship with the formal development of non-fiction film. If the origins of documentary involve the co-existence of two claims—the first visual, the second articulated as language—Peirce's semiotic is uniquely suited for describing this transition as it accommodates linguistic meaning of the second claim without giving it a privileged position. Considering Eco's example above we can recognize that early documentarians—cameramen, editors, directors—were consciously and actively exploring the possibilities of using film language to convey something analogous, to not simply show white snow but to signify the whiteness beyond the specific snowy day. In this way, early film in general, and documentary most determinately, searches for formal techniques that can approximate and feign the signification process that Peirce models in his semiotic. Peirce's refusal to distinguish language as a unique system resonates with what we've already observed in *Kino-Pravda*. Specifically, that the earliest breaks with the aesthetic of actuality came not by dispensing with language but by establishing greater parity between verbal and visual elements in the signification chain.

As a semiotic that does not privilege language, Peirce's theory is able to describe *film meaning* and do so while bypassing the question of translation and transcoding. In

²³² Eco, Umberto *Kant and the platypus: Essays on Language and Cognition*. (Harcourt: New York, 1997), 14.

this way, Peirce differs from the semiotic tradition—of which Metz is a follower—that posits language as a primary modeling system through which other systems of communication acquire meaning. The problem with translation and transcoding of signs into language is that it detemporalizes film meaning, making it difficult to see meaning making as a process unfolding over time. Equating visual images with fixed linguistic units effectively forces one to turn away from the impact of duration on the meaning conveyed by the film.²³³

Unburdened by the need to relate an image to a linguistic counterpart, Peirce's semiotic is able to accommodate the linking of visual signs over time and in movement; Peirce conceives of conscious thought as "unlimited semiosis," a spontaneous generation of signs from other signs, potentially ad infinitum.²³⁴ Tellingly, the most common misunderstanding of Peirce's semiotic reveals the prevailing bias of treating meaning in linguistic terms. In film writing, one often comes across references to a photographic image as an index. Yet for Peirce index/icon/symbol were not types of signs but modalities of a given sign, ever shifting, changing, and operating in varying degrees.

Recognizing that meaning is a product of the sign's shifting modalities is invaluable for documentary. To show this, I would like to conclude this section by drawing a parallel between Peirce's model and the formal innovations underway in *Kino-Pravda*. Recall the image of the steam plough in the "industry for Lenin" sequence of *Kino-Pravda #14*. Between the *For Lenin* title and the image of a steam ship, which begins the abstraction towards industry at large, there are 8 images of the steam plough. As was his wont in depicting labor, Vertov deconstructs the tilling process into different

²³³ At the Pesaro Festival of Modern Cinema in 1965, Umberto Eco criticized the linguistic bias of Christian Metz on similar grounds.

²³⁴ Eco, *Kant and the Platypus*, 39.

angles and scales. At the level of the viewer's reception, a curious thing can be observed with respect to the scene's meaning. The eight shot sequence begins with the steam-plough as a general *symbol* of efforts done for Lenin. Observing the plough in action over several shots facilitates a shift towards the *index/icon*, a return to a more physical representation of a particular piece of machinery, at a particular place in time. As the grammatical influence of the title wanes, the sign's meaning as a symbol recedes but is then re-activated by a series of other steam machines—shots which lead the viewer to retroactively see the steam-plough as a new symbol, this time of "Soviet industry."

I have spoken of documentary as a medium whose origins are inseparable from the challenge faced by early documentarians of using moving photographic images to depict nominally, to signify beyond the real world referent. I do not insist that all documentaries strive for propositional content. If someone were to ask me whether all did, I would readily admit that for certain documentaries the question is neither relevant nor interesting. My argument is merely that documentary's early formal development and its break from actuality filmmaking are inseparable from questions of propositional content. The above account of *perspectival propositions* is not meant as a theory of documentary. Theories, even when employing radically different methods, are underwritten by an assumption that human practices, including a medium of art, can be explained from outside the framework of the norms, standards, conventions that govern them. This is not my position. Above and beyond, I make references to philosophy and theories of meaning not because they explain the development of documentary as a medium but because they clarify and deepen the significance of the assumptions that

Soviet filmmakers, artists, and theorists brought to *khronika* when they first began their critical engagement with it as a medium.

xii. *Kino-Fot* and the search for Constructivist newsreel.

Kino-Pravda was a leap forward for Soviet *khronika* and was immediately recognized as such. A month into its run, favorable reviews began appearing in *Pravda*, the main Soviet newspaper. The influential journalist Mikhail Koltsov wrote several of them. Koltsov was the man who had invited Vertov to join the VFKO in the first place and would continue to support Vertov's work until 1927. What can be observed in the earliest responses to *Kino-Pravda* is that newsreel was beginning to be thought of in terms of cumulative impact and as a cohesive whole. A review written by the satirist A. Zorich in September 1922 illustrates the conceptual shift underway:

As regards, *Kino-Pravda*, the following question should be asked: to what extent does it make use of the enormous propaganda material, which our Soviet reality gives it, at its most important stages, and does it do so with sufficient skill?

Yesterday's screening of *Kino-Pravda*, (eight issues) already gives a sufficient answer to this question. The picture of our life is relatively full. On the screen we saw terrible footage of places where there is starvation, the removal of church valuables, the arrival of Vandervelde, the trial of Right Socialist Revolutionaries.

But to tell the truth, this entire picture does not become any weightier through the insertion of "Views of the Caucasus", with ladies relaxing in the sunshine, or of various horse races with betting, and the excited physiognomies of *Nepmen*, and so forth. This film stock could have been used successfully to shoot, for example, the daily life of the workers, their rest homes, various processes of work in the factories (inasmuch as economic calculations allow), and so on.²³⁵

I quote Zorich's review at length because of its value as a time capsule of a moment when thinking about *khronika* begins to change. When describing *Kino-Pravda*, Zorich lists the individual stories without suggesting any cohesion. Yet in his criticism of scenic pictures—a longstanding trope of newsreel journals—Zorich transitions to considering the social impact of the journal as a whole and wonders whether the "entire picture"

²³⁵ Zorich, A. "На вечере Кино-Правды" in *Lines of Resistance*, 41.

becomes any weightier as a result of the more frivolous content. In doing so, Zorich brings a kind of organicism to what had been largely thought of in a piecemeal fashion. Zorich's article was a small part in a larger social transition during which filmmakers and critics began to think beyond newsreel's ability to preserve significant historical moments. The journal *Kino-Fot* emerges as the central venue where this transition takes place. In its pages, a theoretical understanding of newsreel as a distinct mode of film production first begins to emerge.

Kino-Fot was one of the first illustrated journals to begin publication after the Civil War.²³⁶ In it, one finds Vertov's earliest writings, as well as writings by Lev Kuleshov, Ippolit Sokolov, Boris Arvatov and many other influential critics and practitioners. Aleksei Gan, the journal's editor/publisher/designer, was cinema's link to Constructivist theory and to the artistic paradigms of the Russian avant-garde, many of which predated the revolution. In the years before *Kino-Fot*, Gan worked closely with futurist poets and painters in publishing the newspaper *Anarchy*. During his time as a book designer, Gan worked with the Suprematist Kazimir Malevich to produce catalogues of the painter's work.²³⁷

Malevich was one of the first to coin the term *Constructivism*, which he used to disparage the work of Aleksander Rodchenko in 1917. Between 1917 and 1922, Rodchenko would emerge as one of Constructivism's leading practitioners, together with several likeminded artists associated with the Institute of Artistic Culture (InKhuK) where the earliest experiments with spatial constructions were first produced. Unlike most members of the Working Group of Artists, Gan was not associated with INKhUK.

²³⁶ According to historian of photography Valery Stigneev, most post-Civil-War illustrated journals began to be published between 1923-24, a year after the first issue of *Kino-Fot*. Stigneev, *Век Фотографии*, 33.

²³⁷ When moving from Vitebsk to Petrograd, Malevich apparently stored his paintings in Gan's workshop.

He was invited to join the Working Group as a writer and as an ideologue. After attending several years of Monday night meetings with the Constructivist artists, Gan sat down to capture the idea of the movement in writing.

Published in 1922, Gan's *Constructivism* was intended to represent a consensus of the Working Group. Unfortunately, the theoretical bend that Gan added to the program was not to everyone's liking and would eventually foster a split within the group of artists.²³⁸ Constructivism for Gan consisted of three interrelated concepts: *construction*, *faktura* and *tectonics*.²³⁹ *Construction* was the "coordinating function" of Constructivism and concerned the "actual putting together of an object" or its organization; *faktura* – an artistic buzzword of the time referred to the artist's responsiveness to material properties and refusal to use materials for pre-determined ends; *tectonics*, the most slippery of the three concepts, was a synonym for organic and referred to the refraction of social essence in the construction of an object: "tectonics should lead the Constructivist in practice to a synthesis of the new content and the new form."²⁴⁰

The three concepts overlap significantly. The distinctions between them evaded even Gan's fellow Constructivists, who as Maria Gough put it, had difficulty "grasping his terminological troika."²⁴¹ When the manifesto was published in 1922, *construction* was well understood and *faktura* was seen by the Constructivists themselves as passé: irrelevant and overused. *Tectonics*, however, was a relatively new addition to the program and became the subject of much discussion. Although the Working Group

²³⁸ Gough, Maria *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 68.

²³⁹ Gan's theory is based in part on Alexander Bogdanov's *Tectology: Universal Organization Science*. For more on the connection between Bogdanov and Gan's Constructivism see E. Sidorina "Лики Конструктивизма" in *Искусствознание* '1/07 (XXXIX) (Moscow, 2007), 487.

²⁴⁰ Gan, Aleksei *Constructivism*, accessed 08/12/12 at http://www.mariabuszek.com/kcai/Design%20History/Design_readings/GanConstr.pdf

²⁴¹ Gough, *The Artist as Producer*, 71.

reluctantly allowed Gan to include *tectonics* in the book, disagreement over this specific concept augured the split in the group, leading Gan to accuse “faux-Constructivists” such as Rodchenko and Stepanova of pursuing aesthetics alone.

Standing for the organicity between the social and the material, *tectonics* pushed Constructivism past its embrace of the culture of materials into a form of socially minded cultural production. Gan's concern for the organic interpenetration of material and social essence likewise informed his understanding of cinema and the socio-historical determinism at its core. As an agit-man, Gan had been in charge of organizing political festivals. His experience in agit-theatre—staging mass spectacles—was, no doubt, conducive to his thinking about the relationship between a work's effectiveness in the delivery of information on the one hand and its formal and visual character on the other.

In 1924 Gan would turn to making *khronika* films himself but in 1922 he was most interested in theorizing the difference between cinema new and old. He tackles the subject in *Kino-Fot*'s inaugural note from the editor "Cinema and Cinematography" (“Кинематограф и Кинематография”). The essay charts a course for the filmmaking of the future:

These are the two directions, along which work is done on the other side of the screen.

Cinema or Cinematography?

Yesterday – Cinema.

Today – Cinema.

Tomorrow – Cinematography!

Today we are clearing the paths for tomorrow.

It is hard to find exact English analogues for the distinction between old cinema and new that Gan proposes; the closest analogue I can think of is the distinction between cinema and cinematography articulated by Robert Bresson years later and in an altogether

different key. Bresson distinguished *cinema*, a form of filmed theater, from *cinematography*, which was a new artistic language that united moving images and sounds. Similarly Gan likens “kinematograf” to “living photography, a technical apparatus for the reproduction of theatre arts.”²⁴² Hopelessly outdated, “kinematograf” was a product of the “old capitalist system of exploitation.”²⁴³

Much of what Gan writes about cinema reveals the proclivities of his artistic milieu. The embrace of the “geometrical and mechanical beauty,” for example, echoes the Futurist fascination with machinery and technology, and had been prominent amongst the Russian avant-garde since before the Revolution.²⁴⁴ Similarly, Gan’s disparagement of cinema as practiced up until then echoes the critic Nikolai Punin’s 1919 lectures on modern art, which stressed modern painting’s failure to come to terms with modern existence and, in particular, the impact of technology.

Keeping the above concerns in mind Gan stressed that new cinema, which he labeled *кинематография* (*cinematography*), had to embody the technological nature of modern society. Unlike Bresson, whose understanding of *cinematographie* was based on years of practice, Gan believed *cinematography* to be an organic extension of an increasingly technological society: “Cinematography – a material apparatus of public technology, an extension of society’s “organs” – is the work of the proletarian government.”²⁴⁵ The concept of *tectonics* helped reconcile the technological and the social.

²⁴² Gan, Aleksei “Кинематограф и Кинематография” in *Kino-Fot* Vol. 1 (Moscow 1922).1.

²⁴³ Gan, “Кинематограф и Кинематография,” 1.

²⁴⁴ Ippolit Sokolov makes explicit reference to Marinetti’s fascination with the Dreadnought ship.

²⁴⁵ Gan, “Кинематограф и Кинематография,” 1.

Gan's interest in *tectonics* led him to consider Constructivism as socially determined and even inevitable. Through *tectonics*, Gough argues, Gan's Constructivism became:

the 'necessary artistic practice of its particular historical moment. ...directly responsive to the abrupt shifts that underpin the process of the building of communism (unlike sculpture and architecture, which are “eternalizing” and “monumentalizing” in their aspirations). Constructivism fosters the momentary, transitional, flexible, and adaptable over the monumental and the eternal.²⁴⁶

There is reason to believe that Gan understood cinema in a similar way. Though the word *tectonics* does not appear in the pages of *Kino-Fot*, the repeated calls for organicity and orderliness to exist between film form and modern Soviet reality become proxies for the concept. Transferring central tenet of *tectonics* —the organicity of form and content—to *khronika* involved a radical reinterpretation of the medium's role as a source of information. *Khronika*'s responsibility to capture significant historical moments was effectively replaced by the film's ability to be organized in way that made manifest the historical moment as such.

Though *Kino-Fot* was not exclusively a journal of film theory—it also included Constructivist designs, reports on new film and photo technology, and synopses of films—its theoretical reflections on film practice were unique for its time. Much of the writing on cinema that appeared in Gan's *Kino-Fot* revealed an underlying concern for the interplay of film form and social meaning reminiscent of *tectonics*. Emphasis on the organicity of form and social meaning appears in the writing of many contributors to the journal, often appearing as concern for a work's “zakonomernost” (закономерность). A borrowing from the German (*regelmäßigkeit*), the word combines “orderliness” with “regularity.” The term, which is not uncommon in Russian, suggests abiding by a pattern

²⁴⁶ Gough, *The Artist as Producer*, 70.

or a law, not in the legal sense but as in a law of science, nature, or history. In *Kino-Fot*, *zakonomernost* emerges as a concept used to measure the artistic success of new Soviet cinematography.

Picking up on Gan's introduction to the inaugural issue, Lev Kuleshov's article "Art, Modern Life, and Cinematography" follows and elaborates the distinction between *cinema* and *cinematography* by applying the principle of "orderliness" to actual film practice. For Kuleshov as for Gan, the artistic situation in 1922 was dire: "modern art has reached a hopeless dead end;" "modern cinema has no organic link to modern life."²⁴⁷ The blame for this rests with both the producers and the viewers. The disparate tastes of audiences have brought chaos and a lack of order to the film industry. Theatrical cinema, with its psychological melodramas and excessive emphasis on staging, only perpetuated the disorder.²⁴⁸

To rein in the influence of old cinema and to straighten out the scattered aesthetic tastes of viewers, Kuleshov promoted a film art characterized by precision in its treatment of space, time and in its overall organization. Kuleshov saw montage as the imposition of order:

No false psychology, no mere affixing of theatrical events, cinematography must be orderly [закономерная], and distributed across space and time in an orderly manner [законно-распределенная]. Cinematography that affixes humans and other natural material and organizes using montage the attention of the viewer...

For now, you can welcome American detective films and stunts. But wait for a picture, that is filmed following an orderly [закономерному] screenplay, with objects constructed in space and time in an orderly [закономерно] manner and with the participation of appropriate subjects – naturalists.²⁴⁹ The day, when

²⁴⁷ Kuleshov, Lev "Art, Modern Life, and Cinematography" in *Kino-Fot* Vol. 1 (Moscow 1922), 2.

²⁴⁸ Before the revolution Kuleshov himself worked on such films as set designer for the director Evgeni Bauer.

²⁴⁹ Naturalist [натурщик] is the term Kuleshov uses to describe actors working according to his method as opposed to theatrical actors.

such a picture is shown, will be a great day for many people. For then they will gain, what was forever lost to them in modern art.²⁵⁰

Kuleshov believed that this great day would come with the release of his next feature, the hyper-Americanized *Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks* (1924), which showcased many of the montage experiments conducted in 1923 that to this day bear Kuleshov's name.

In his book *Montage*—excerpted in the third issue of *Kino-Fot*—Kuleshov further advocates bringing an engineer's precision to American montage, thus making it orderly and Soviet. Echoing Gan's *tectonics*, Kuleshov believed that Soviet reality gave cinema properly modern content and, as a consequence of such proper content, the required formal language. Thus, a shot of a railroad bridge or some other technological marvel was inherently more cinematic because of its simplicity of line and its recognizable rectilinear shape. Reflecting on Kuleshov's aesthetics, Steven Kovacs writes:

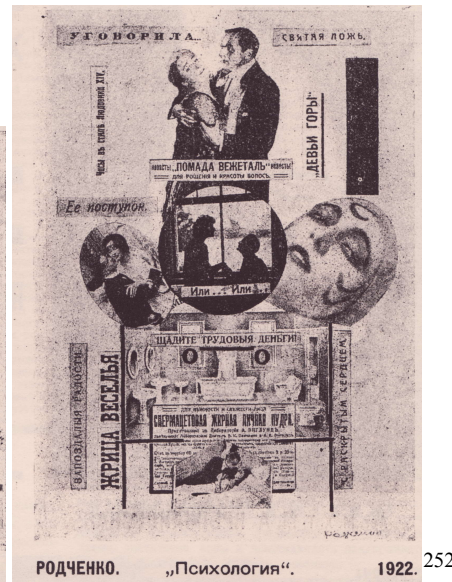
A simple object can be apprehended more quickly, and as a result, shorter pieces of film can convey the intended visual information. That brevity is essential for a cinema whose syntax is actively determined by montage, for the success of a juxtaposition of varied pieces of film depends on a sufficiently rapid cutting which focuses viewer attention on the connections between the shots rather than the shots themselves.²⁵¹

Thus, orderliness at the level of montage—maximum efficiency in conveying narrative information to the viewer—could only be attained when the formal content was sufficiently “realistic,” that is thoroughly modern. This, in essence, is what distinguished Kuleshov's own work from American predecessors.

Kuleshov's article in *Kino-Fot* was accompanied by two of Aleksander Rodchenko's print collages: “Psychology” and “Detective.”

²⁵⁰ *Kino-Fot* #1, 2-3.

²⁵¹ Kovacs, Steven “Kuleshov's Aesthetics” in *Film Quarterly* Vol. 29, No.3 (Spring 1976), 36.

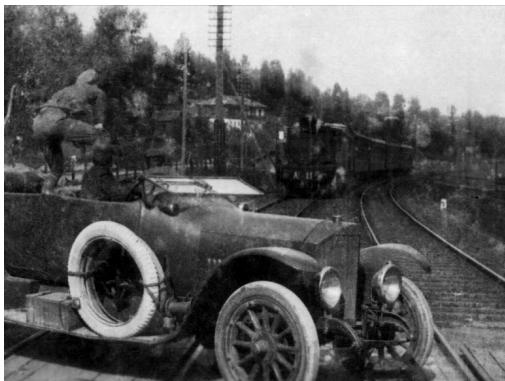


Pastiches of slogans and tropes, these two collages reduce American films to their narrative essentials. But whereas the detective illustration(left) is rectilinear and full of modern technology, the psychological drama(right) is circular and sweeping, geometrically displaying its indebtedness to bourgeois intrigues.

The "Detective" collage illustrates Kuleshov's view of modern reality as inherently more cinematic. In trying to strip down narrative to its most modern and *ipso facto* most cinematic elements, Kuleshov made no distinction between fiction and newsreel. Though lost, one of Kuleshov's earliest works, *On The Red Front* (1920) is a narrative that mixed *khronika* and staged material. The film historian Nikolai Izvolov, who restored extant bits of the film, estimates that newsreel made up about a third of the material, including a brief portrait gallery of Red Army commanders at the end and footage of a cavalry attack at the beginning of the film. Stills from Izvolov's reconstruction reveal the film as an American style adventure thriller—full of chase scenes and cliffhangers—bookended and contextualized by documentary footage.

²⁵² *Kino-Fot* #1, 2-3.

[On the Red Front: Nikolai Izvolov reconstruction] ²⁵³



The bulk of the available information about *Red Front* comes from an article written in *Kino-Fot #4* by Leonid Obolenski, one of the film's stars. When Ivar Smilga, a member of the Revolutionary Military Council (Революционный Военный Совет) unexpectedly obtained a

²⁵³ Courtesy of Nikolai Izvolov.

limited amount of positive film stock in 1919, he invited Kuleshov and his group of actors, along with cinematographer Petr Ermolov, to make a *khronika* film “enlivened by an action sequence.”²⁵⁴ The crew set out without a script, having decided that the film would be made entirely out of whatever could be filmed on location. Whereas early fiction-actuality hybrids (e.g. *A Policeman's Tour of The World*) used a fictional conceit to unite disparate snatches of real world footage, Obolenski's account, as well as Kuleshov's own brief recollections, suggest an inverse approach: the film's goal was to bring the *orderliness* of action films to an actual historical event.

Obolenski notes that the openness to the contingency of the real world was completely at odds with the precision and total control practiced in Kuleshov's workshop.²⁵⁵ During filming, the crew believed that the film was doomed to fail, something that Kuleshov accepted, taking solace in the fact that a *khronika* film that intuitively followed the American montage method, was still likely to be better than most of the Soviet product. Given how little space—just two paragraphs—Kuleshov accords to *On the Red Front* in his many volumes of writings, it is likely that the film was indeed a failed experiment. (Obolenski offers it only faint praise, saying that it turned out better than expected). Though there was demand for several prints to be struck, D. Leshenko, one of VFKO directors, forbid it citing the film's ‘harmful’ and perverse use of American montage.²⁵⁶ By 1922, the attitude toward American cutting had become more accepting. Kuleshov returned to the editing room to reconstruct the film. But even then, as Obolenski tells us, Kuleshov, like Vertov on *Battle of Tsaritsyn*, encountered resistance

²⁵⁴ Obolenski, Leonid “Как мы снимали *На Красном Фронте*” in *Kino-Fot #4* (Moscow, 1922) 2-3.

²⁵⁵ Obolenski, “Как мы снимали *На Красном Фронте*,” 2-3.

²⁵⁶ Obolenski, “Как мы снимали *На Красном Фронте*,” 2-3.

from editors, who refused to insert shots that were only several frames long into the picture.

The story of Kuleshov's *On the Red Front*—its production, reception, and failed reconstruction—portends the larger conflict that emerges when the view of cinema as an orderly and thoroughly modern art form is applied to records of the real world. Whereas Kuleshov conceptualized montage by referring back to principles of narrative efficiency, maintaining the same commitment to orderliness in *khronika* was impossible unless one abstracted from plot. Such abstraction meant re-conceiving American montage as a Constructivist practice grounded in the theory of tectonics.

One of the first to separate American montage from the content of American films was the critic Boris Arvatov. Writing in the second issue of *Kino-Fot*, Arvatov makes an argument for Soviet cinema to be built from the raw material of *khronika*:

What is needed is cinematography that builds objects out of its own technological capacity, i.e. in a Constructivist manner, i.e. in a goal-directed manner. Only this kind of cinematography will reveal all its possibilities. We already have an example of this: American cinema.

Not only are American films Constructivist, they are maximally agitational in their form.

Even detective stories?

It's time to understand that when talking about agitation, we do not mean the specific ideology that needs to be put forward... but the methods that have to be used for that end.

Detective films and Americanism have nothing in common.²⁵⁷

Arvatov effectively disassociates Americanism, which referred both to style and content, from plot, making it into an abstract force capable of changing reality. The author then proceeds to suggest that agit-films should transform reality in a similar way:

Agitation is first and foremost a weapon for transforming reality. Visual agitation must effect its transformation directly, through its own nature.

²⁵⁷ Arvatov, Boris "Агит-Кино" in *Kino-Fot* #2 (Moscow, 1922), 2.

Dynamism and hyperbolism of movement – are prerequisite conditions for agit-cinema. But this should not lead one to assume that we then need fantasy, symbolism, etc.

On the contrary. Only the most real, the most modern material belongs in the agit-film.²⁵⁸

In Arvatov's article, Kuleshov's emphasis on the reality and modernity of material is augmented with concern for real world impact. The extent to which Arvatov adheres to Plekhanov's definitions of propaganda and agitation is not clear. What is significant, however, is that the author conceives the power of film agitation visually, rather than verbally, "through its own nature" rather than through the use of slogans.

It would not be long before Arvatov's abstracted and Constructivist understanding of American montage would be manifest in *Kino-Pravda* itself. Reviewing *KP#10* in the fourth issue of *Kino-Fot*, Aleksei Gan proclaimed that the issue finally moves *khronika* in "the direction of real cinematography." By this he meant that the raw material records and the journal's formal construction were synthesized, thus fulfilling the basic promise of tectonics: "The tectonic as a discipline should lead the Constructivist in practice to a synthesis of the new content and the new form."²⁵⁹ To show the orderliness at work in *Kino-Pravda*, Gan emphasizes the construction, rather than the content of individual stories:

The value of the tenth "Kino-Pravda" is not in its abundance of material but in the rhythm and the tempo to which the film conforms, from the first shot to the last.²⁶⁰

The international festival of the union of youth, and assembling a car, and a restoring a factory – in a word, people, machines, and the material environment – all this has been presented in concert with cinematic orderliness [закономерность].

²⁵⁸ Arvatov, "Агит-Кино," 2.

²⁵⁹ Gan, Aleksei *Constructivism*, accessed 08/12/12 at http://www.mariabuszek.com/kcai/Design%20History/Design_readings/GanConstr.pdf

²⁶⁰ Gan, Aleksei, "Кино-Правда" in *Kino-Fot* #4 (Moscow, 1922), 4.

Gan begins by echoing the pre-existing habit of writing about newsreel as a collection of individual events (the festival of the union of youth, assembling a car, restoring a factory). But immediately after, he reconceives the individual stories as an abstraction—"people, machines, and the material environment"—all held together by cinematic orderliness.

Like Arvatov, Gan understands American montage as distinct from plot: "In it [KP#10] American montage is just the means to constructs shots, sequences, and individual scenes."²⁶¹ If American cutting is just the means, what is the end? Nothing less than a new form of filmmaking. Gan proclaims that Vertov's use of montage amounted to a fundamental break in the way that *khronika* had been practiced and understood until then:

Khronika ceases to be illustrative material reflecting this or that place in our many-faceted contemporary life, and becomes contemporary life as such, outside of territories, time, and individual significance.²⁶²

Put another way, by becoming a Constructivist practice, *Kino-Pravda* severed its commitment to the concrete historical referent ("this or that place") and discovered the ability to embody contemporary reality at the level of the raw material. In this way, the orderliness Gan saw in *Kino-Pravda* was not simply proper *construction* but also a manifestation of *tectonics*, the organic connection between the form of the work and contemporary life as such.

It is not surprising that Aleksei Gan would embrace *khronika* as a Constructivist film practice. Given the above, I suspect that Gan saw in *newsreel* a way of rehabilitating *tectonics*, his most controversial concept. *Tectonics* could give a theoretical foundation to

²⁶¹ Gan, "Кино-Правда," 4.

²⁶² Gan, "Кино-Правда," 4.

the oft-stated sentiment that Soviet newsreel must not simply adapt the look and templates of Western newsreel. Whereas "American cutting" simply referred to the *construction*, a concept like *tectonics* offered the promise of thinking beyond American form and moving towards Soviet reality.

For many years Vertov has been referred to as a Constructivist filmmaker. Given his collaboration with Aleksander Rodchenko as well as his prominence in *Kino-Fot* and later in the *New LEF* journals, the label is to be expected. Recent research has challenged this label somewhat, suggesting that *the kinoks* were too much of a sect to be accepted by Constructivist artists.²⁶³ For my purposes, the precise degree of Vertov's affiliation with Constructivists is less important than recognizing the way that Constructivism's theoretical paradigms accommodate the shifts underway within *khronika* as an informational medium. From this angle, *Kino-Pravda's* visual lessons in reading the world, with their vacillation between the specific and the symbolic, resonated with the Constructivist focus on process, or as Yuri Tsivian so memorably put it, on the artistic shift from "the work of art to the art of work."²⁶⁴

During its first six months, *Kino-Pravda* overturned many of the conventions that characterized the newsreel journal. Like Gan, Koltsov and many others, Vertov recognized how transformative his experiments had been. He took stock of these accomplishments in "He&I" an article published in the second issue of *Kino-Fot*. Both the first and third person throughout the article refer to Vertov; the split between them is a playful rhetorical trope with which Vertov juxtaposes the material difficulties plaguing

²⁶³ For more on this see Tsivian, Yuri "Turning Objects, Toppled Pictures: Give and Take between Vertov's Films and Constructivist Art" in *October* 121. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007. p. 92-110.

²⁶⁴ Tsivian, Yuri, lecture during the opening of the Vertov retrospective, (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 04/15/2012).

production with an optimistic assessment of the progress already made. Beginning in the third person, Vertov summarizes the changes he brought to *khronika* production:

I like it how in *Kino-Pravda*, he subtly buried the burials of dignitaries and the parades of the high-and-mighty, which both had been essential to the *khronika* of *Pathé* and *Gaumont*.

He made the cameramen, set in their ways, break the old habit of only shooting 10-15 meters from one fixed position.

To get a sense of the difference I suggest comparing the footage of the May 1st ("Cavalry training in the Kremlin", "The First of May" et al) with the cinematography in the latest issues of *Kino-Pravda*.²⁶⁵

Vertov rightfully takes credit for re-organizing *khronika's* mode of production. Stills from *Kino-Pravda* that accompanied the article confirm Vertov's claim that the observational wide shot had lost its dominant position. Close-ups, canted frames and many other techniques were now part of newsreel's formal vocabulary.



Like Arvatov, Vertov acknowledges—above and elsewhere—the influence of American montage on *Kino-Pravda*. Yet he is careful to point out that his contribution to *khronika* should not be seen as simply the application of American montage—rapid cutting and

²⁶⁵ Vertov, Dziga "Он и Я" in *Kino-Fot* #2 (Moscow, 1922), 9-10.

²⁶⁶ Vertov, "Он и Я," 9-10.

changes in angle—to newsreel material. The experiments in *Kino-Pravda* explored uncharted waters:

American montage isn't news in itself. By now it can already be considered classic. The distance between the clumsy montage in Russian Kino-dramas and the montage in an American detective film is the same as the distance between Karamzin and Pushkin.

Kino-Pravda, having left the shores of the old habits has not yet arrived at the shores of the classics, as a result of the objective material difficulties described above. But those with a trained eye, will have no doubt noticed, the attempt, still perceptible, the attempt to sail past the shores of the classics without docking at the port.²⁶⁷

The analogy with a ship voyage suggests that while American montage may be a useful navigational tool, Vertov did not plan on docking at the port for long and envisioned newsreel beyond the efficient organization made possible by rapid cutting.

Vertov's analogy with a ship voyage can also be read as signaling a break between Kuleshov's and Vertov's understanding of montage. Though Kuleshov made occasional statements about the organic connection between modernity and formal film language, his own montage practice continued to be a study in intensified efficiency. Reducing plot to bare essentials through analytic editing, films like *The Death Ray* and *Mr. West* presented a kind of hyper-Americanism: extremely dynamic narratives that bordered on the incomprehensible.²⁶⁸

While narrative remained Kuleshov's bottom line in thinking about montage, Vertov reinterpreted American film style as an abstract form of dynamism. Not having recourse to a plot that could span several newsreel stories, Vertov's interest was not so much in the organization of events or narrative sequences, but in organization as an integral property of the film medium. In the manifesto "WE"—Vertov's most famous

²⁶⁷ Vertov, "Он и Я," 9.

²⁶⁸ For more on Kuleshov's influence on a whole wave of American-style Soviet films see my and Ana Olenina's essay "Miss Mend and Soviet Americanism" and DVD-supplement "Miss Mend: A Whirlwind Vision of America." (Los Angeles, CA: Flicker Alley Productions, 2007).

piece of writing—he explained how the work of the *kinoks* differs from the American precedents:

To the American adventure film with its showy dynamism and to the dramatization of the American Pinkertons the kinoks say thanks for the rapid shot changes and the close-ups. Good ... but disorderly, not based on a precise study of movement. A cut above the psychological drama but still lacking a foundation.²⁶⁹

Whereas Kuleshov thought of a close-up on a hand firing a gun as, in some sense, a basic unit, Vertov took the matter one step further. Refusing to consider the shot as cinema's analogue of the atom, Vertov isolated movement and promoted the *interval* as the base unit used in constructing cine-phrases in an orderly manner.



Vertov promotes the *interval* as part of his definition of new Soviet cinema. Vertov's, Gan's, and Kuleshov's accounts of new Soviet cinema all appeared in the first issue of *Kino-Fot*. Echoing Gan's tectonics and Kuleshov's concern for orderliness, Vertov's definition of *kinochestvo* stressed the harmonious relationship of the parts and their ordering:

Kinochestvo is the art of organizing the necessary movements of objects in space as a rhythmical artistic whole, in harmony with the properties of the material and the internal rhythm of each object.

²⁶⁹ Vertov, Dziga "Мы" in *Kino-Fot* #1 (Moscow, 1922), 11-12.

²⁷⁰ Vertov, "Мы," 12.

Intervals (the transition from one movement to another) are the material, the elements of the art of movement, and by no means the movements themselves. It is they (the intervals) which draw the movement to a kinetic resolution.²⁷¹

The two paragraphs above represent one of Vertov's clearest description of his understanding of montage. Looking ahead to his later work, it is tempting to see this description of *intervals* as a definitive turning point, a move away from a realistic mode of filmmaking to a montage one. But as I warned earlier, seeing the emergence of documentary as a transition to montage filmmaking may make us myopic to the significance and pull exerted by newsreel's other obligations—to the historical moment recorded, to the delivery of comprehensible information about that moment. The organization of newsreel material according to *intervals* challenged the way non-fiction footage was typically received and the way that meaning was usually attributed to non-fiction footage. Whereas before the viewer saw *khronika* as a window through which to see the world, the *interval* was an important step in the transition towards a mode of spectatorship that saw newsreel footage as signifying beyond the particular moment captured by the camera.

By 1922, both photo cameras and film cameras had long been instruments in the service of *mechanical objectivity*. In their remarkable study, *Objectivity*, Peter Galison and Loraine Daston, define this type of objectivity as follows:

By mechanical objectivity we mean the insistent drive to repress the willful intervention of the artist-author, and to put in its stead a set of procedures that would, as it were, move nature to the page through a strict protocol, if not automatically. This meant sometimes using an actual machine, sometimes a person's mechanized action, such as tracing. However accomplished, the orientation away from the interpretive, intervening author-artist of the eighteenth century tended (though not invariably) to shift attention to the reproduction of individual items rather than types or ideals.²⁷²

²⁷¹ Vertov, "МЫ," 11.

²⁷² Daston, Loraine and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2010), 121.

As a scientific virtue, *mechanical* objectivity begins to emerge several decades before the invention of photography. Yet the influence that the production of photographic images exerts in promoting the virtues of *mechanical objectivity* is difficult to overstate.

Indexical images were essential to the promotion of this new scientific virtue because:

They seemed to promise direct access to nature, unmediated by language or theory. Camera obscura tracings, photographs and the inscriptions of self-registering instruments were all, at one time or another, touted as nature's own utterances.²⁷³

We've observed something similar to this "direct access" when discussing the reception of actuality and newsreel prior to 1922. While certainly not unmediated, early non-fiction film reinforced the illusion of an eyewitness encounter in which the camera/viewer passively observes the scene. Beginning with the use of slogan titles, *khronika* began to push against some of the observer's presumed passivity. Addressed directly by agitational slogans and sentence fragments, the viewer became interactive and participated in the process of meaning making. Consequently, the viewer's attachment to the idea of "direct access" to individual historical moments weakened as nominal and otherwise symbolic meanings became more prominent.

In the same work, Daston and Galison describe the appearance, between 1880-1930, of a different epistemic virtue, which they term *structural objectivity*. Prevalent amongst mathematicians, physicists and logicians, *structural objectivity* did not replace *mechanical objectivity* but emerged alongside it, acting as a kind of bulwark against the solipsism that plagued an individual's examination of scientific images, even when those images were produced with minimal interference from the observer. Going against the

²⁷³ Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 256.

promise of *mechanical objectivity*, proponents of *structural objectivity* questioned the notion that "direct access" yielded knowledge:

Confronted with results showing considerable variability in all manner of sensory phenomena, some scientists took refuge in structures. These were, they claimed, the permanent core of science, invariant across history and cultures. Just what these structures were – differential equations, the laws of arithmetic, logical relationships – was a matter of some debate. But there was unanimity among thinkers as diverse as the logician Gottlob Frege, the mathematician Henri Poincaré, and the philosopher Rudolf Carnap that objectivity must be about what was communicable everywhere and always among all human beings – indeed all rational beings, Martians and monsters included.²⁷⁴

Given that *structural objectivity* represented a sanctuary of the intellect and a turning away from the flux of phenomena, we could not identify Vertov's transition from shot to *interval* as a turn towards *structural* and away from *mechanical objectivity*. Nonetheless, there are significant similarities between Vertov's *interval* and *structural objectivity*.

What links such a radically exclusive definition of objectivity to Vertov's manifesto is the search for an invariant "permanent core" not susceptible to solipsism, subjectivity, and, in the case of *khronika*, pre-existing, possibly ideologically suspect, interpretations of Soviet reality. Put another way, making the *interval* into a building block shifts the locus of *khronika*'s meaning from the historical reality to physical movement as such. Similarly, the impulse towards structural objectivity identified absolute time and geometry as conventions and focused on the underlying relations those conventions were meant to encapsulate.

While *Kino-Pravda* may undermine the non-interventionist virtues of *mechanical objectivity*, thinking of film in terms of *intervals* represents the search for a medium-specific form of objectivity. For Kant, "objective validity" (*objektive Gültigkeit*) described the transcendental conditions that made experience possible, the forms of

²⁷⁴ Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 47.

sensibility such as time, space, and causality. Subjectivity referred to mere empirical sensations. Vertov re-conceives newsreel along a similar trajectory, focusing on the constants of perception—the recorded visual rhythm and movement—rather than on an event’s stabilized meaning and fixed informational content.

The theoretical groundwork for the interval had been in place before Vertov. As an artistic gesture, the *interval* followed closely the trajectory of the Russian avant-garde. Kazimir Malevich, one of the pioneers of what is referred to by historians of art as *non-objective*, that is, non-representational art, referred to his Suprematist works as “objective.”²⁷⁵ The Constructivist move from the canvas into a third dimension was likewise a move towards greater objectivity. The architectural spatial constructions of Tatlin, Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Ioganson and others followed the avant-garde's impulse to make art into objects that existed and functioned in the world, outside of the exhibition hall. The similarity of this tendency across different art practices exemplifies the Russian avant-garde's drive to purify media, an impulse that, as W.J.T. Mitchell rightly points out, has been “one of the central utopian gestures of modernism.”²⁷⁶ In this light, the idea of organizing *khronika* based on *intervals* is similarly purifying gesture. That is why Vertov's manifesto continues to be read as offering a theoretical foundation for experimental film. The focus on the *interval* also explains why Malevich himself recognized Vertov's as being “the first to raise the new problem of dynamics in film.”²⁷⁷

But in 1922, Vertov was not an experimental filmmaker, he was a newsreel man and, increasingly, a gun for hire, making government reports, advertisements for children’s toys and Soviet exports. While the range of subjects served by non-fiction

²⁷⁵ Malmstad, John Lecture 10//03/2008

²⁷⁶ Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 5.

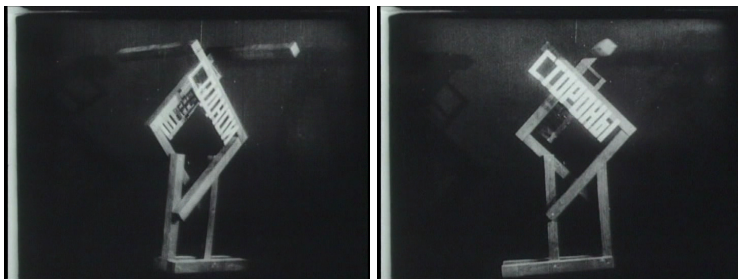
²⁷⁷ Malevich, Kazimir, “Живописные законы в проблемах кино” in *Lines of Resistance*, 341.

expanded, basic assumptions about communicability remained in place. The organization of *khronika* using intervals occasionally ran counter to newsreel's more pragmatic obligations. Between 1922-1927, these conflicts and collisions would appear both at the micro and macro levels, at the level of the single image-text units as well as in regards to the overarching organizational strategies.

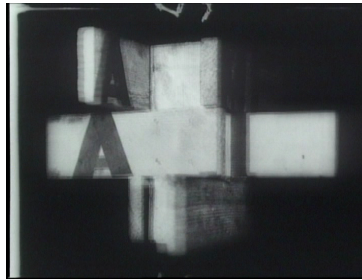
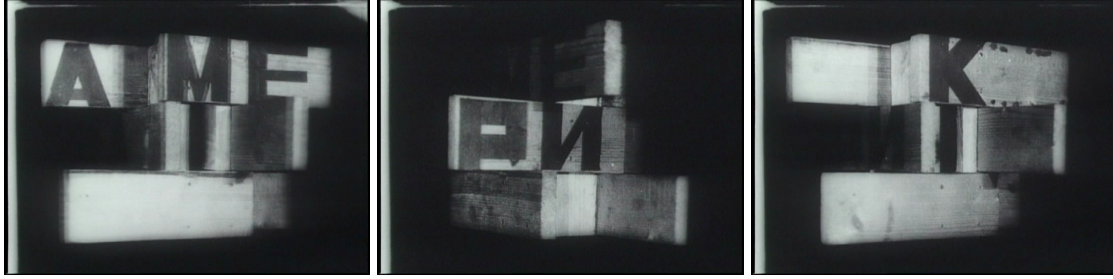
In future sections, I consider how an event-based, indexical understanding of *khronika* ran counter to the new organizational strategies that begin to be applied to non-fiction film. But as mentioned above, this conflict can appear at different levels. At its core it is the conflict between two conceptions of film meanings, two conceptions that documentary film struggles to reconcile. The conflict is between fixed propositional content, on the one hand, and its integration into the flux of phenomena, on the other. At the micro level, perhaps the single best illustration of this conflict may be Rodchenko's famous moving intertitle-constructions that Vertov used in *Kino-Pravda* #14.



[The blurry truth: motion blur in Aleksandr Rodchenko's intertitle constructions].



[From one side]



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[America]

Stills, in this case, completely fail to convey the experience of watching these intertitles in motion. And yet it is only in motion, and over time, that these sculptures, Rodchenko's last, are able to deliver their linguistic content. The experience is an aesthetic treat, but also cognitively dissonant in a way that is almost irritating.

Karel Teige's *Alphabet*, the letters used to spell out *k-h-r-o-n-i-k-a* at the start of this work, is the closest photographic equivalent I know. Looking at the body of the dancer Mlica Mayerova and trying to inscribe the letters back into her contour is reminiscent of the strain one experiences in trying to reconcile Rodchenko's dancing letters and three dimensional structures with the propositional content that they deliver.

²⁷⁸ *Kino-Pravda* #14



Teige's 1926 photomontage alphabet and Rodchenko's intertitles engage the same basic question: How can photographs of three dimensional material objects, be they flesh and blood or wood and metal, be made into vehicles of letters, syllables, words, propositions? In Teige's words, he sought to create "a system of signs capable of embodying words in graphic figures."²⁸⁰ This question resonated across the European avant-garde. In his 1925 modernist manifesto *Painting, Photography, Film*, Laszlo Maholy-Nagy called for a similarly dynamic combination of photographic image and lettering, which he called 'typofoto.'

As we have seen thus far, the initial Soviet attempts to move towards greater integration of visual and verbal content were celebrated. The response to Rodchenko's moving intertitles in *Kino-Pravda* was overwhelmingly positive:

[Rodchenko] has produced three new types of cinema intertitles: a garish intertitle in large letters filling up the whole screen; three-dimensional intertitles; and intertitles which move through space. The intertitle has changed from being a dead point in a film to an organic part of it.²⁸¹

²⁷⁹ Teige, Karel *ABECEDA: A Jazz-Age Alphabet from Prague, 1926* (London, UK: Redston Press, 2010).

²⁸⁰ Teige, *ABECEDA*, 1.

²⁸¹ Tsivian, ed., *Lines of Resistance*, 57.

Both Vertov and the Constructivist movement would come to be associated with machines and mechanical processes. There is good reason for this but the review above, like many of the theoretical reflections covered in this section, draws our attention to the organicism common to many of the earliest *khronika* experiments. We saw a similar preoccupation in the pages of *Kino-Fot*. An organic, holistic streak was evident in Gan's *tectonics*, in Kuleshov's *orderliness*, and in Vertov's theory of the *interval*. As *Kino-Pravda* moves forward, this organicism likewise informs Vertov's most famous concept, that of the *kino-eye*.²⁸²

The *kino-eye* begins as an organizational tool used to integrate disparate pieces of footage. As a formal technique, the *kino-eye* made higher-order integration of verbal and visual material possible. Not just the integration individual image-text pairs or sequences, but an organic unity of disparate stories and the possibility of longer *khronika*. Instead of integrating verbal and visual in accordance with grammatical expectations, the *kino-eye* posited the integration as occurring within a single mental entity, an entity caught between being "an organism and a machine" to borrow Malcolm Turvey's memorable phrase.²⁸³

I have returned to this tension on several occasions, framing it in relation to specific image-text articulations but also theoretically, in the discussion of the co-existence implied by the *two claims hypothesis*. In the pages ahead, we will see the tension between the verbal and the visual manifest itself in the critical resistance and rejection of specific films and specific techniques for their failure to be *khronika*. Recall the mental strain experienced when looking at Teige's alphabet or Rodchenko's intertitle

²⁸² In a recent article, Malcolm Turvey makes a convincing case for the influence of Bergson's *Creative Evolution* on Soviet Marxists and artists such as Vertov.

²⁸³ Turvey, Malcolm "Vertov: Between the Organism and the Machine" in *October* No. 121 (Summer 2007), 5-18.

constructions. And, before moving forward, try to imagine what happens to that mental strain as *Kino-Pravda* moves beyond integrating phonemes and individual words and images, and begins to integrate larger units of meaning into a greater whole.

xii. The evolution of an eye.

The integration of titles and images opened up *khronika's* visual style and helped *Kino-Pravda* shed the newsreel journal's old form. Looking at the 23 issues of *Kino-Pravda* completed between 1922-25, the irregularity of the journal's format is immediately noticeable. Beginning as a near weekly journal in 1922—fourteen issues completed in about six months—the output drops to only three issues during 1923. Four more issues of the journal followed in 1924, with three more to come in 1925. Unlike earlier issues, which maintained the Pathé journal format and included general interest and topical stories, later *Kino-Pravdas* were lengthier, formally more complex, and often forewent newsworthiness or currency altogether.

Kino-Pravda's transition away from topical reporting was made possible in part by the expanse of newsreel production across the Soviet Union. Starting in April 1923, the weekly *Goskino-Calendar*, also overseen by Vertov, came out regularly and provided topical weekly *khronika*. Starting in 1924, Moscow would get its own local journal: *Kino-Moskva*.²⁸⁴ Regional newsreel outfits such as Sevzapkino and Proletkino were part of a general *khronika* resurgence across the Soviet Union extending as far as Turkestan and Azerbaijan(AFKU).²⁸⁵ Mezhrabpom-Rus' – the most financially successful film production company of the previous years opened a *khronika* branch.

The increase in institutional and government support for *khronika* at this time is inseparable from Lenin's death on January 21, 1924. The significance of Lenin's passing for the Soviet Union is hard to overestimate. For *khronika*, the consequences were likewise manifold. Like the first and fifth anniversaries of the October revolution, Lenin's

²⁸⁴ Vishnevski, *Документальные фильмы дореволюционной России*, 153.

²⁸⁵ *Кино-неделя*, № 17 (1924), 10.

death led to a resurgent public discussion about the value of newsreel as a historical document. The day Lenin's death was announced, a special committee in Goskino was given virtually unlimited resources to film the events surrounding the funeral on January 28. Outside of Moscow, local *khronika* workers were instructed to film all public events related to the death. In Moscow, shooters were tasked with making a protocol: "from the moment the body was taken from Lenin's house in Gorky up until the end of the funeral process."²⁸⁶ A tremendous amount of material leading up to the funeral itself was filmed. To give just one example of the thoroughness: every changing of the guard, occurring every 10 minutes for 48 hours straight, was filmed. Some of this material would find its way into *Kino-Pravda* #21, which would be released for the first anniversary of Lenin's death.

The *khronika*-film *The Funeral of V.I. Lenin* arrived shortly after the memorial services were complete. Edited in just two days, the film was shown to the Central committee on January 30th, and released to the general public less than a week later on February 5th.²⁸⁷ Ten days later, a joint resolution of the Central Committee (ЦИК) and the National Commissariat ordered that all existing *khronika* of Lenin was to be collected and centralized at the Lenin Institute.²⁸⁸ The desire to organize the extant footage of Lenin came in the wake of a controversy that besmirched the funeral. The American cinematographer John Dored, employed by Pathé, had filmed the funeral procession without official permission. Dored was arrested and spent 6 weeks in jail. While most of

²⁸⁶ Goldobin, A. "Как была создана кинокартина 'Похороны В.И.Ленина'" №1.(Moscow: Proletkino, 1924).

²⁸⁷ *Кино-газета* 1924, № 6, February 5;

²⁸⁸ Nina Tumarkin's book *Lenin Lives* does an admirable job of talking about the post-death activity. Also useful are the first two chapters of *Lenin's Embalmers* by Ilya Zbarsky.

his footage was confiscated, he managed to send approximately 200 meters abroad, where it was exhibited in March.²⁸⁹

Following a series of strokes in 1922, Lenin had been absent from active politics for some time before his actual death. His pending demise created a political atmosphere that combined anxiety over succession with bombastic reconfirmation of Leninism as a program for the country's future development. In the film world, this amounted to the resurgence of a campaign against bourgeois currents in society and a well-spring of support for *khronika*, kino-lectures, and other non-fiction advocated by Lenin. Speaking at the first major consortium of Soviet film companies, Lunacharski urged greater party involvement in film production, putting particular emphasis on *khronika*.²⁹⁰

Consequently, one of the resolutions adopted in connection with the establishment of a domestic film monopoly gave Soviet film companies equal rights to shoot footage across the Soviet Union.

The stabilization of the economy allowed for more resources to be allocated to film. The number of commissions increased; distribution of films expanded beyond commercial theaters. Both these factors were conducive to the development of long-form non-fiction.²⁹¹ Inside Goskino, the Culture Association (Культобъединение) was created in March of 1923 and tasked with producing "хроникально-документальные" (khronika-documentary) and "научно-популярные" (scientific-popular) films. In October of 1924, following the transformation of Goskino into Sovkino, a joint stock company with a financial base and greater mandate, the cultural division was renamed

²⁸⁹ *Правда* № 32 (February 9th, 1924), 4.

²⁹⁰ *Кино-газета*, 8 april, 1924.

²⁹¹ For more on the economics of early Soviet film production see Youngblood, Denise *Soviet Cinema in Silent Era*, 1918-1935.

Kultkino. Shortly thereafter, the Kultkino studio built a new laboratory in order to accelerate the speed of *khronika* production and distribution. Along with producing films, Kultkino was also tasked with sorting through pre-Revolutionary *khronika* to select and preserve footage believed to contain historical value.²⁹²

Kultkino's first major production was *Abortion or the Trial of Midwife Zayzev* (1924). Like the agit-films discussed previously, *Abortion* was a scripted and staged story film. Directed by Noj Baklin, the film was structured like a trial procedural. In addition to footage of the trial, *Abortion* included illustrative animations and informative graphs, designed by the kinok Ivan Beliakov and integrated into the film's *sujet*.²⁹³ In one sense, the use of such supplementary expositional material was the only stylistic overlap with *khronika*. Seen from a different angle, however, the continued grouping of newsreel with agit- and educational films was predicated on the assumption that both proceed by addressing its audience directly.

The three factors described above—the historical reflection prompted by Lenin's death, the loosening of material hardships that crippled production, and the institutional reshuffling of Goskino—resulted in extensive debates about the content and style of Soviet film. These debates involved multiple players, including the Commissariat of Enlightenment, the individual studios, various cultural critics, the Association of Revolutionary Cinematography (*ARK* - the chief organization of cinema professionals) and the filmmakers themselves. The breadth of perspectives ensured that the debates were not limited to ideological saber rattling and remained sensitive to economic factors and audience demands. Concern for the fiscal side of things became particularly

²⁹² *Кино-газета*, № 8, (February, 17,1925), 2.

²⁹³ Vertov, *Kino-Eye*, 72.

important after several official decrees made it clear that film studios would receive little direct funding from the government and would need to be profitable and competitive against foreign product.²⁹⁴

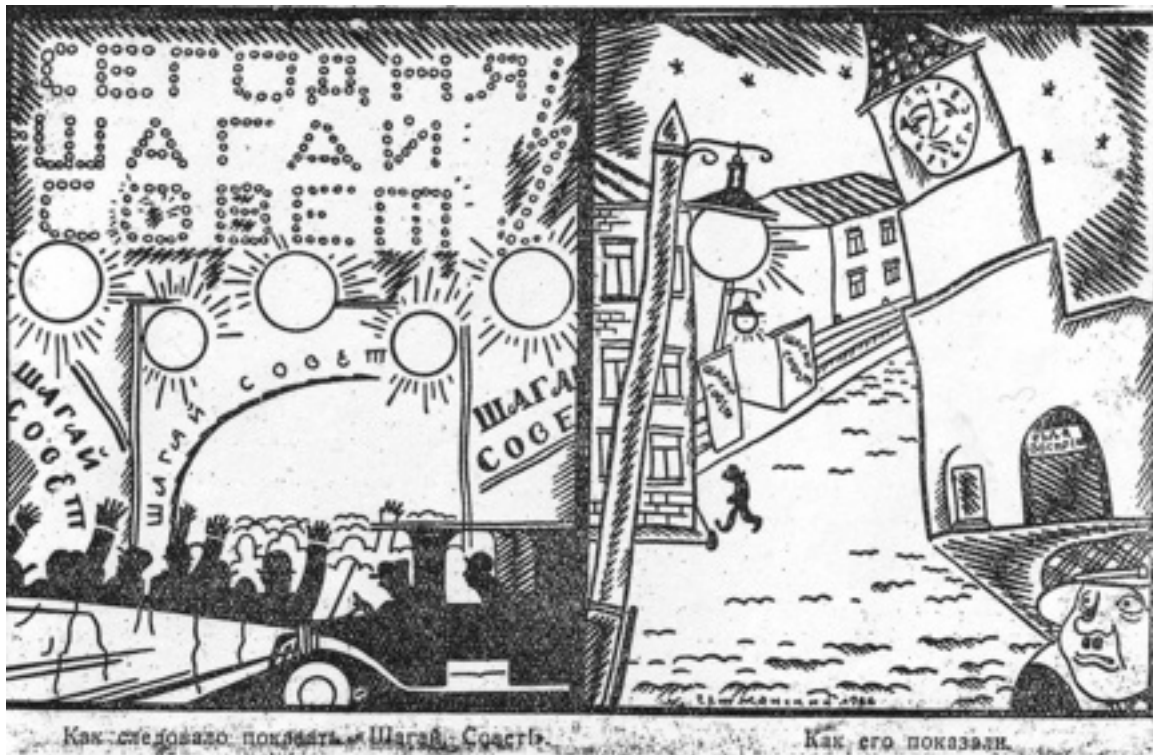
As production increased, the competitiveness of domestic film remained a pressing concern. Most Soviet fiction films continued to be denigrated as technologically inferior to their foreign, particularly American, counterparts. Even successful Soviet films, to say nothing of the failures, were marred by comparisons with sleek foreign products, which were more reliable at the box-office. Domestic blockbusters, such as Perestiani's *Red Imps* (1923), were celebrated for outdoing the Americans at their own game. But, as Lev Kuleshov found out with his *Mr. West* (1924), imitation of American hits could also backfire. The film met harsh criticism over what was seen as its uncritical adoration of American technique. Despite the mass popularity and profitability of American films, Soviet Americanism continued to be met ambivalently. While some critics embraced the commercial success of American-style Soviet films, such as *Miss Mend*, others were repelled by their lack of ideological seriousness.

The failure of most Soviet fiction films to compete at the box office was a factor in favor of *khronika* expanding to a feature length format. As with the earlier promotion of lecture-film circuits, which was intended to undermine the monopoly of commercial theaters, long-form *khronika* came with the promise of taking market share away from the foreign product beloved by audiences. No longer limited to short informational segments preceding a frivolous feature, *khronika* could now receive top billing in commercial movie houses.

²⁹⁴ For more on this see Pozdorovkin, Maxim and Ana Olenina "Miss Mend and Soviet Americanism" Flicker Alley, DVD booklet, 2007.

The promotion of *khronika* as a potential rival of the fiction film continues throughout the 1920s. In the aftermath of Soviet film triumphs such as Pudovkin's *Mother* (1926) and Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), fiction would receive the lion's share of the critical attention. Nonetheless, the largely positive initial response to Vertov's work gave ammunition to the proponents of *khronika*. Although it would not be until Yakov Bliokh's *The Shanghai Document* (1928) and Viktor Turin's *Turksib* (1929) that non-fiction would produce commercial hits, the idea that *khronika* could be a box-office contender begins to appear around 1925-1926.

The following advertisement for Vertov's *Stride, Soviet!* (1926) depicts an exhibition system not attuned to the possibilities of non-fiction film.



The left panel shows a marquee, bright lights, and a cheering crowd. The panel is captioned: "How *Stride, Soviet!* should have been shown." On the right, a deserted street and a barely noticeable poster. The caption underneath reads: "How it was actually

shown." The pressure to promote non-fiction better seems to have worked. That same year, Vertov's next film *A Sixth Part of the World* would run at Malaia Dmitrovka, Moscow's premiere theater, which typically played high-profile Western films. It was the first *khronika* film to be shown there. Such prominent exhibition paved the way for substantial publicity and elaborate advertising campaigns for non-fiction in the future.

Above, I've outlined some of the historical factors that enabled newsreel's growth into a feature-length film. These factors, however, do little to explain how newsreel would address the practical problem of assembling disparate stories into a multiple-reel film without losing basic coherence. As with our modern difficulty gauging the hold that the *view aesthetic* exerted on early viewers, the organizational challenges may likewise be difficult for us to imagine. Many of the organizational principles that emerge at this time are second nature to us today and appear as self-evident. Charting the emergence of the *kino-eye* as an organizational tool puts back into focus the challenges facing *khronika* makers in the first half of the 1920s.

One of Vertov's earliest and most famous neologisms, the *kino-eye* was an attempt to theorize the simultaneous encoding and recording that documentaries accomplish. In "The Birth of the Kino-Eye," following a list of slogans and an account of his own creative trajectory, Vertov offers the following definition:

Kino-eye is the union of science with *khronika* to further the battle for the communist decoding of the world, as an attempt to show the truth on the screen.
Kino-Pravda.²⁹⁵

Vertov begins to use the term *kino-eye* (Кино-глаз) regularly in 1923. The word derives from and replaces Vertov's earlier, more Slavonic, neologism *kinok* (kino + oko (Slavonic for eye), which he used to describe himself and his like-minded *khronika* collaborators.

²⁹⁵ Vertov, *Kino-Eye*, 41-42

The urgency with which Vertov promotes his *kino-eye* between 1923 and 1924 stems, in large part, from the mockery and disdain that the term *kinok* begins to attract around the same time. Most notably, Aleksander Anoshchenko used Vertov's penchant for neologisms against him and described the kinoks as a symptom of *kinococitis*, a degenerative bacterial infection that, while not lethal, would produce degenerate, Futurist-tinged cinema.²⁹⁶ According to Vertov, Anoschenko later added public insult to injury by insisting that a window be opened after one of Vertov's public speeches, in order to air out the stink.²⁹⁷

Anoschenko was not the first to voice discomfort with Vertov's theorizing and with some of *Kino-Pravda's* experimental detours. On July 24th, 1923 V. Shentiapin's article "Intellectual Cine-Sophistry" appeared in *Pravda* under the rubric: "New Currents in Cinematography." Nominally, the article discusses Soviet cinema as a whole and not *khronika* in particular. Yet *kinoks* are the only ones named directly and *Kino-Pravda's* failure to convey information comprehensibly is the article's main focus. While nominally acquiescing to the call for new movements in cinema, Shentiapin nonetheless insists that novelty must be checked and balanced:

...cinema should not be alien to new movements, but those movements should be healthy, sensible, and, above all, not in the shadow of any "kinocs-castrated" and "montage" effusions. We should not forget that the cinema is a purely proletarian art, an art for the masses, for the workers and peasants. It is only thanks to the cinema that workers in the most far-flung corners and the countryside can be familiarized with the productions of the world's best artists of stage and screen, with the best plays of the world repertoire, and in this way can be introduced to cultured life, given a healthy, rational means of entertainment, and thus turned away from drunkenness and home-brew.²⁹⁸

²⁹⁶ Anoschenko, Aleksander "Кинококи" in *Lines of Resistance*, 90-1.

²⁹⁷ Vertov, *Статьи и выступления*, 55.

²⁹⁸ Shentiapin, V "Intellectual Cine-Sophistry" in *Lines of Resistance*, 86.

As the label *kinok* was subjected to more and more opprobrium, *kino-eye* appeared in Vertov's writing as a slogan for a new type of *khronika*. By the time the film *Kino-Eye on its First Reconnaissance* was released at the end of 1924 the concept *kino-eye* had ballooned considerably, becoming a Venn diagram of overlapping and at times vaguely related ideas. It stands for, amongst other things: all non-fiction film, the struggle against the privileging of fiction film, the name of Vertov's group of collaborators, a mode of cinematic sight ("opens eyes and clarifies vision"), an agency inside the film, and *khronika*'s contribution to the World Proletarian Revolution.

In light of the above breadth, it is not surprising that over time *kino-eye* and Vertov have become somewhat interchangeable. The conflation of the concept with Vertov's oeuvre has been particularly prominent outside Russia. In Russia, the first collection of Vertov's writings, edited by Sergei Drobashenko and published in 1966, was titled *Dziga Vertov: Articles, Diaries, Ideas*. The English analogue of Drobashenko's collection, edited by Annette Michelson and first published in 1984, was *Kino-Eye: the writings of Dziga Vertov*.

By subsuming Vertov's career under the umbrella of his most famous concept, critics tend to obscure questions of evolution across his films, a process controlled as much by the realities and requirements of a particular production as by Vertov's artistic temperament. This lack of sensitivity to the formal evolution in Vertov's work has been particularly strong abroad where knowledge of manifestoes such as "We" is widespread, but, until recently, only *The Man With The Movie Camera* and one or two of his later films (*Three Songs of Lenin* and *Enthusiasm*) have been seen with any regularity. By contrast, Vertov's rediscovery in Russia—less fanatical than its counterpart in 1960s

France, for example—has been less attached to a single concept or film. In Soviet film circles and film schools, Vertov's writings were accompanied by access to earlier works such as *Kino-Eye*, *Kino-Pravda #21: A Film Poem About Lenin*, and *A Sixth Part of The World*.

Even though much of Vertov's reputation is intertwined with the image of and the theoretical writing about the *kino-eye*, there has, to my knowledge, been no attempt to consider its development as a formal technique across the filmmaker's work, let alone to assess its influence on the development of documentary. As a formal device, the *kino-eye* pre-dates the film *Kino-Eye* by several years. Its genesis is found in the recurring shot of a man flipping through a newspaper in *Kino-Pravda #5*:



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The use of a shot as a recurring leitmotif was nothing extraordinary even in 1922. The trope had been made famous by Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916), which despite being a commercial failure in the US, was well-known in Soviet Russia. This was in no small part because of the film's emphasis on the corrosive social effects of American-style capitalism.

²⁹⁹ *Kino-Pravda #5*



In Griffith's film the shot of an "Eternal mother," played by Lillian Gish, recurs as the transition between four storylines, which are otherwise centuries apart. In *Kino-Pravda #5*, the shot of a man reading the newspaper—Vertov himself—functions in a similar way, except for a small self-referential wrinkle. What is only implied in Griffith's film—the eternal mother contemplating man's intolerance across history—is literalized in Vertov: the man is actually *reading* the stories the audience is seeing. To drive the point home, the name of the newspaper is *Kino-Pravda #5*.

Actualizing the metaphor of reading in this way has two notable consequences for what would become *kino-eye*. First, the observer is put inside the space of the film. Second, the act of reading and the act of seeing are knotted together and made equal. As the *kino-eye* becomes a consistent presence in *Kino-Pravda* it becomes increasingly clear that, for Vertov, violating the boundary between the seer and the seen is inseparable from teaching vision as a form of reading. These two tropes regularly reappear, though not always together, in the issues following *KP#5*.

The next issue, for example, begins, with shots of the projectionist pulling out a film reel entitled *Kino-Pravda #6*—the same issue the viewer is about to see—and

³⁰⁰ *Intolerance* framegrab. DVD: Image entertainment

loading it into the projector.



As many will recall, Vertov will do something very similar seven years later, at the start of *The Man With The Movie Camera*. In the context of a newsreel journal, however, the device represents a continuation of the drive to put informational content inside the profilmic space rather than present it with a title card. We first saw this tendency in *A Free Russia* and its emphasis on political banners. The titles in *Kino-Pravda* followed suit and promoted title-image integration by using transparencies, light titles, and three-dimensional constructions. All of these innovations helped eradicate the longstanding distinction between the record of an event and the information needed to contextualize that record.

Vertov takes the idea of verbal and visual integration a step further when he aligns optical exploration with reading. Seen in *KP#5*, this alignment continues in the searchlight title at the start of *KP#15*:



³⁰¹ *Kino-Pravda* #6

³⁰² *Kino-Pravda* #15

The searchlight moves across a black frame, eventually landing on the words *HA CTPAЖE* (*On Guard*). The next shot shows a battleship's rotating turret, cut to match the motion of the searchlight. The impression of observation created—an idea explored by Cristina Vatulescu in her recent book—mimics the viewer's scanning the frame for a center of signification.³⁰³ At this stage, Vertov renders the center of meaning with text. In future issues, he would subject visuals to similar scanning.

Tellingly, *KP#15*, with its searchlight intertitle, is also one of the first *Kino-Pravda*'s to be organized around a single theme from start to finish. The theme of this particular issue was war, understood to include the political struggle to prevent war, the requisite military preparedness in case of outbreak, and the figurative “war” against religion and other forms of ignorance. The image-title combination below—showing the firing of so-called *agit-artillery* shells filled with propagandistic leaflets—encapsulates both the literal and metaphorical warfare on display in the issue.



Kino-Pravda#16 survives only as fragments and montage lists. The issue had an overarching theme: “Spring *Kino-Pravda*: a scenic khronika.” Divided into three sections (Springtime in Moscow; homeless youth; “May is with you”) the 16th issue was intended,

³⁰³ Vatulescu, Cristina *Police Aesthetics: Literature, Film, and the Secret Police in Soviet Times*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).

³⁰⁴ *Kino-Pravda #15*

according to Vertov, "to express contemporary reality through a feeling of spring."³⁰⁵

After the "Spring Kino-Pravda" every single subsequent issue would come with an analogous subheading or title. By contrast, of the first fifteen issues, the "cine-poem" *KP#13* was the only one to have a title.

Of the subheadings and titles that Vertov gave the various issues of *Kino-Pravda*, perhaps the most puzzling belongs to *KP#17*, an issue made for the first Soviet Agricultural, Handicraft, and Industrial Exhibition in Moscow. The issue is a single reel long and is introduced as a "*khronika* experiment."



There is little in the archives to explain why this short and relatively straightforward issue is designated an experiment (опыт). To be clear, the word *experiment* here is not a cognate of and does not mean that the issue was experimental (экспериментальная), a term Vertov used to describe both *KP#15* and *KP#16*.³⁰⁷ Instead, *experiment* in this case implies a scientific experiment. While the possibility that Vertov was simply choosing to be bombastic for its own sake can't be dismissed altogether, I believe the issue represents one of the first realized attempts at rendering images propositional without relying on grammatical structures.

³⁰⁵ Vertov, *Статьи и выступления*, 33.

³⁰⁶ *Kino-Pravda* #17

³⁰⁷ Vertov, *Статьи и выступления*, 33.

Given the breadth of titling techniques on display in *Kino-Pravda* by 1923, the titles in issue#17 appear suspiciously retrograde. There is little integration of title and image, few sentence fragments, no grammatical substitutions. The title cards never suggest any causal connections across images. As in pre-Revolutionary newsreel journals and actualities, the titles in *KP#17* either identify speakers (e.g. Lunacharski) or social types (e.g. peasant, worker [image]) or else they provide the location of the shot (e.g. in the field, at the factory etc).



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The full list of titles is as follows:

HUNGER
 HARVEST
 THE CHILDREN OF PEASANTS
 ALL-RUSSIAN ELDER KALININ
 THE CHILDREN OF WORKERS
 LENIN
 FOR THE EXHIBITION
 AT KANATCHIKOVO STATION
 DISPLAYS
 TO THE EXHIBITION
 AT ONE OF THE EXITS

³⁰⁸ *Kino-Pravda* #17

WORKER
 PEASANT
 AT THE FACTORY
 IN THE FIELD
 AT THE FIRST SOVIET AGRICULTURAL, HANDICRAFT AND INDUSTRIAL
 EXHIBITION.
 LUNACHARSKI
 [scrolling text]THE FIRST SOVIET AGRICULTURAL, HANDICRAFT AND
 INDUSTRIAL EXHIBITION OPENS AUGUST 19th AT NOON [plan of the exhibition]



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Excepting Ivan Beliaikov's elaborate map of the Exhibition (above), the titles in *KP#17* appear to be deliberately sparse and old-fashioned even when compared with the titling in the more conservative newsreel journal *Goskino-Calendar*.

Each sequence in *Goskino-Calendar* began with a title that listed the exact date and location of shooting, each shot serving as the event's protocol. Title cards in *Goskino-Calendar* did not unite disparate sequences, provide "psychological" links or suggest causal relations. They did, however, provide extensive technical information (e.g. tech specs of a tractor) that, as in *The Anniversary* before, remained external to the image and resisted easy visualization.³¹⁰

Kino-Pravda #17 does none of the above. On the contrary, an informational deficiency runs through the issue. So, what is it that makes the issue an experiment? Vertov's own statements about *KP#17* are limited to one paragraph in a speech from June 9th, 1924:

³⁰⁹ *Kino-Pravda #17*

³¹⁰ RGAKFD - *Goskino-Calendar* 19.1924 Item #168

Kino-Pravda #17 was released for the opening of the All-Union Agricultural Exhibition.³¹¹ It shows not the exhibit itself, but the 'circulation of blood through the system' caused by the idea of the Agricultural Exhibit. A big step from the fields to the city: one foot in the rye fields of the villages – the other on the territory of the Exhibit.³¹²

Echoing the organicism of Gan's *tectonics*, the metaphor of the circulatory system refers to a theme that runs throughout the issue: the need for an "alliance between the city and the country" (смычка города и деревни). For anyone living during the New Economic Policy (1921-28), this was a familiar political slogan. It addressed the need for proportionate development of the agrarian and industrial sectors following the partial privatization under NEP.

The issue ends with the opening of the Exhibition and a portrait of Lenin made entirely of flowers. But the real culmination is elsewhere. In the issue's penultimate sequence, there are three iterations of a scene in which two men read “ALLIANCE”, the newspaper published by the Exhibition Committee starting in 1923.³¹³



³¹¹ In his notes Vertov abbreviates the exhibition as C-X meaning Сельско Хозяйственной (i.e. agricultural) and does not include the full title, given in the issue itself, which includes Handicrafts and Industrial production. The importance of the exhibit bringing both agrarian as well as Industrial production will be apparent shortly.

³¹² Vertov, *Статьи и выступления*, 52.

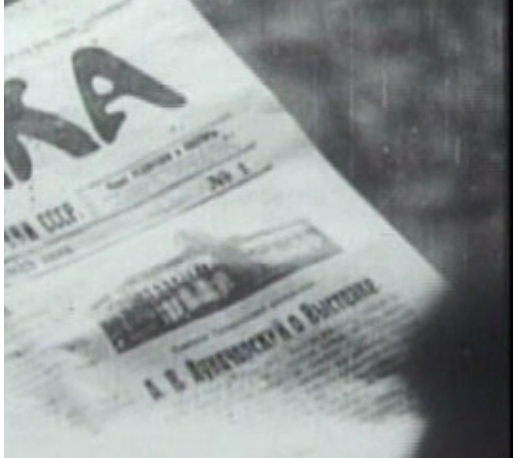
³¹³ Sovmedia.ru, "Газета "Смычка." Accessed on 08/12/12 at <http://www.sovmedia.ru/journalist/465>



After the second newspaper insert, the sequence repeats. Each repetition follows the same general shot order. The shot/countershot of the two men is replayed; the pan that began on the thatched house picks up where the previous iteration left it. The movement of the workers through the frame continues across the three iterations. Combining the leitmotif of the man reading the newspaper in *KP#5* and the searchlight in *KP#15*, *KP#17* creates an analogy between an observer's visual scan of the peripheries and the act of reading a print article.

The analogy is made concrete after the first repetition, when a two shot sequence of Anatoli Lunacharski touring the grounds of the exhibition is inserted into the scene. The appearance of the Commissar is jarring unless we happen to notice the headline in the right corner of the newspaper (magnified below). The title of editorial is: “A.V. Lunacharski on the Exhibition.”

³¹⁴ *Kino-Pravda #17*



By inserting a shot of Lunacharski into the visual row, the act of reading comes to correspond with an image of thought, blurring the distinction between perception and a mental image produced by reading. The blurring of the two is only enhanced by the fact that the men's physical location is not clearly established. They could be at Kanatchikovo station where the preparatory work takes place, but the viewer is not given any specific cues; the sequence began with the insert of the newspaper and not an establishing shot.

As the scene unfolds, it is likewise unclear whether the shots of the doorway, the pan on the house, and the image of workers by the river belong to the two readers' optical or mental points of view. There appears to be a gradual transition between the two alternatives. The similarity of the wooden support beams in the shot of the men and the shot of the doorway that follows suggests some spatial contiguity between the shots. But after the shot of the doorway, the physical connection begins to disintegrate. The shot of the men by the bank of the river could be anywhere and recalls shots seen earlier in the issue. *Are the men looking around them as they read? Are they recalling their earlier work? Have the images seen earlier become the subject of an article that the men are now reading?* There is no one clear answer.

³¹⁵ *Kino-Pravda* #17

The indiscernibility of images of thought and optical records helps explain the anti-climactic way in which this scene ends. Though not all of Vertov's viewers would recognize *ALLIANCE* as the trade paper of the Exhibition, most would be familiar with the ubiquitous NEP slogans about the need for such an "alliance" between peasants and workers. The parallel editing between peasants and workers throughout the issue, together with the accelerating cutting rate in the sequence above, contribute to the viewer's sense of an impending resolution. Most viewers will watch the above sequence with a good deal of anticipation, expecting the two men on-screen to actualize the symbolic bond between city and country. In fact, in the next issue of *Kino-Pravda #18*, as well as in *Stride, Soviet!*, Vertov provides such a resolution. The two lines are brought together with a handshake, and a transparency title that declares their bond *Alliance*.

(N.B. the shot below is used in both films):



So why then, after the frenetic build-up, does issue seventeen stop short of showing some sort of union? The repetition of the same sequence of shots, beginning with the men reading the paper, imitates the mental gallop towards synthesis. Yet the appropriate conclusion is left to the minds of the two men reading the paper onscreen and to the mind

³¹⁶ *Kino-Pravda #18*

of the viewers observing the readers. The sequence didactically leads the viewer towards the conclusion and then, at the last moment, removes the training wheels, entrusting the momentum of the preceding visuals to generate the appropriate mental synthesis. The preceding transition from optical perception to mental imaging allows the spectator to make the interpretive leap and conclude the need for an "alliance." The final step is the viewer's. It is possible that Vertov, feeling anxious about the effectiveness of the "experiment," decided to make the point more explicit in the very next issue of *Kino-Pravda*.

One could argue that the Exhibition of Agriculture, Industry, and Handicrafts is itself the resolution. But I believe the point above still stands. Vertov neither stresses the Exhibition as an example of the "alliance" nor pushes the viewer to make what he calls "a psychological link" between the above sequence and Lenin's portrait made of flowers.



Instead, the scene of the men reading ends as it began with an insert of the newspaper, which then transitions to Ivan Beliakov's elaborate graph of the plan that is held on screen for over two minutes. The two triumphant shots above come only after a lengthy separation between the sequences.

As in previous issues, *KP#17* expects participation from its spectators. Anyone can show a peasant and a worker coming together in an image. But in this "experiment"

³¹⁷ *Kino-Pravda* #17

the art work itself leads towards such a union. There is no grammatical structure to direct this activity. Instead, there are simple records and the eventual moment of synthesis is displaced to a space outside of the film. *KP#17* prompts the interpretation visually. As the newspaper sequence repeats, the footage of the workers moving across the frame becomes an image of thought that incorporates the dialectic of city and country familiar from the rhetoric of the period.

In the "industry for Lenin" sequence in *Kino-Pravda #14*, the viewer participated in creating the film's meaning by integrating word and image, a process that played itself out as the perpetual shifting of a sign's modalities and in the propositional content conveyed by the image. The steam-plough began as a general symbol of labor done for Lenin, over time returned to a more indexical representation, before being retroactively appropriated as an image standing in for the entirety of Soviet industry. Something similar takes place during the newspaper sequence above with the crucial addition of an observer into the space of the film. This presumed observer has the effect of internalizing the fluctuation between optical images and mental imaging. The accelerated cutting rate is received as mimicking the mental activity taking place inside the minds of the two men reading the newspaper. But one could also ask whether it occurs inside the implied observer looking at the two men from the side. Or else inside the mind of the viewer who is sitting on the other side of the screen? At a certain point in the sequence, perception and mental imaging become indistinguishable. How this inability to differentiate optical and mental perception impacts the "communist decoding of the world" Vertov intended for newsreel is the subject of the next section.³¹⁸

³¹⁸ Vertov, *Kino-Eye*, 21.

xiii - "I see": on the possibility of a *free indirect objective*

Although Vertov does not place the camera inside the space of the film in *KP#17*, the "alliance" sequence introduces what is to become one of *kino-eye's* essential tropes: the shattering of the line between viewer and spectacle, subject and object. An implicit "I see" is placed inside the space of the film, when the viewer realizes that the images on the screen may in fact be the mental images of the two men reading the newspaper. The fact that the line between the two is obscured in *KP#17* without a direct interpretive imperative—the title *For Lenin*, for example—has some thought-provoking consequences for meaning in documentary and for film meaning, in general.

In one sense, the sequence appears as an empirical demonstration of Hugo Münsterberg's claim that cinema is an art of subjectivity: "the massive outer world has lost its weight, it has been freed from space, time, and causality, and it has been clothed in the forms of our own consciousness."³¹⁹ Yet at the same time, by depicting the dematerialization of the world as a gradual shift from perception to interpretation, Vertov makes signification in documentary into a process of meaning making, rather than the fixation of stable units. Let us for the moment leave aside Vertov's penchant for describing the camera's ability to "affix" facts, more on which later.

The idea of film meaning as a process rather than a set of stable semantic units has been most profoundly explored by the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze. In his books on cinema, Deleuze adapts C.S. Peirce's semiotic as an alternative to the ossified signifier/signified unit at the core of linguistically-based models. Deleuze does this because of the way that Peirce's semiotic is able to describe meaning making in cinema

³¹⁹ Münsterberg, Hugo *The Film: A Psychological Study* London, UK: Dover Publishing Inc., 1970), 95.

without disregarding the role of time. Deleuze, as David Rodowick puts it, found Peirce's semiotic:

more applicable for understanding the generation and linking of signs in movement. Where semiology wants to define the cinema sign by imposing a linguistic model from the outside, Deleuze applies Peirce's logic to deduce a theory of signs from material the cinema has itself historically produced.³²⁰

Along with accommodating the "linking of signs in movement" Peirce's semiotic gives insight into the epistemic fluctuation between documentary's two claims. Earlier, I described how the shifting modalities of the sign in Peirce's semiotic provided a model for considering how documentary images assume and subsequently shed their propositional content. Peirce's semiotic can describe sequences such as that of the steam-plough so aptly because of its view of meaning as unlimited semiosis, a spontaneous generation of signs from other signs, potentially *ad infinitum*.

Peirce also turns out to be very helpful for teasing out the implications of Vertov's placement of an "I see" inside the film space. To do this one need first to consider Peirce's notion of a *dicisign* and Deleuze's reading of it. A *dicisign* (or *dicent sign*), in Peirce's writing, is a concept peculiarly suited to documentary. Many of the definitions that Peirce himself gives could moonlight as descriptions of non-fiction film: "*a Dicent Sign* is a sign, which, for its Interpretant, is a Sign of actual existence."³²¹ Or else: "*a Dicisign* is a sign which is understood to represent its object in respect to actual existence..."³²² Most would agree that replacing "a dicisign is a sign" with "a documentary is a film" yields two highly plausible definitions of non-fiction film.

³²⁰ Rodowick, David *Gilles Deleuze's Time Machine* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 7.

³²¹ Peirce, C.S. "A Syllabus of Certain Topics of Logic" in *Essential Peirce* vol. 2 (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992), 292

³²² Peirce, "A Syllabus of Certain Topics of Logic," 292.

One could argue that all photographic images are *dicisigns* because all photographs testify to an objective existence of light particles. But the *dicisign's* resonance with documentary film runs deeper. Peirce's conceives of a *dicisign* as having propositional content and admitting truth-values:

The readiest characteristic test showing whether a sign is a *Dicisign* or not is that a *Dicisign* is either true or false, but does not directly furnish reasons for its being so. This shows that a *Dicisign* must profess to refer or relate to something as having a real being independently of the representation of it as such.³²³

The propositional capacity of the *dicent sign* is apparent from the triad to which the term belongs: *rheme*, *dicent*, and *argument*. Whereas *dicents* have propositional content, *rhemes* do not. *Rhemes* most closely resemble logical predicates.³²⁴ With regards to documentary's two claims, Peirce's definition of a *rheme* is intriguing because, like a piece of unsequenced documentary footage, it has the potential to be but is not *de facto* propositional:

Take any proposition and erase certain parts of it, so that it is no longer a proposition but only a blank form which after every blank had been filled by a proper name would become a proposition, however nonsensical. Such a blank form of proposition which can be converted into a proposition by filling every blank with a proper name has been called by the writer a *rheme*.³²⁵

The idea of a *rheme* as a "blank form" of a proposition reappears throughout Peirce's writing and echoes many of the debates, discussed earlier, about what photographs can and cannot tell us.

Both *rhemes* and *dicents* make an appearance in Deleuze's cinema books not far from the caveat that "we borrowed from Peirce a certain number of terms whilst changing

³²³ Peirce, "A Syllabus of Certain Topics of Logic," 276.

³²⁴ On occasion, Peirce also likens *rhemes* with words: "A *rheme* is any sign that is not true nor false, like almost any single word except 'yes' and 'no', which are almost peculiar to modern languages" in "A Letter to Lady Welby," in *Essential Peirce*, 33-34.

³²⁵ Peirce, "The Basis of Pragmatism," in *Essential Peirce*, 19-20.

their meaning."³²⁶ To be clear, in most other cases Deleuze's use of Peirce's vocabulary maintains a relatively straightforward connection with the original meanings. This is not so for *rhemes* and *dicents*.

On occasion, Deleuze describes perception in cinema as a continuum, much like the continuum of physical matter, covering solids, liquids, and gases. In this continuum:

The *dicisign* refers to a perception of perception, and usually appears in cinema when the camera 'sees' a character who is seeing; it implies a firm frame, and so constitutes a kind of solid state of perception. But the *rheume* refers to a fluid or liquid perception, which passes continuously through the frame.³²⁷

Reading the above, you may have noticed that Deleuze changes *rheme* to *rheume*. He does so in order to correct and assimilate a mistake made by Pier Paolo Pasolini, who along with Peter Wollen was one of the first to bring Peirce's semiotic to the realm of film theory. In an endnote, Deleuze clarifies Pasolini's poetic misappropriation of Peirce's term:

In his classification of signs, what Peirce distinguishes from the '*dicisign*' (proposition) is the '*rheme*' (word). Pasolini takes up Peirce's term, but introduces a very general idea of flowing into it, (*L'Experience hérétique*, p.271). But here Pasolini makes an etymological mistake. In Greek, that which flows is a *rheume* (or *reume*).³²⁸

Deleuze can't simply correct Pasolini's mistake because the *rheume's* fluidity is necessary both for Deleuze's view of perception as a range of physical states and for Pasolini's central theoretical concept: the *free indirect subjective*.

The *free indirect subjective* is an analogue of what narratologists refer to as *free indirect discourse*—words colored by the character's subjective experience without being directly attributed to the character. To develop this concept Pasolini draws on the work of

³²⁶ Deleuze, Gilles *Cinema 2: The Time Image* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, 1989), 32.

³²⁷ Deleuze, *Time-Image*, 32.

³²⁸ Deleuze, Gilles, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, 1989), 229.

Russian linguist Mikhail Bakhtin. What interests Pasolini, and Deleuze after him, in Bakhtin's analysis of *free indirect discourse* is the lack of a clear divide between the observer and the observed. The sentence: "She summons up her strength: *she will rather endure torture than lose her virginity*" is problematic for Bakhtin because, Deleuze tells us:

There is not a simple combination of two fully-constituted subjects of enunciation, carrying out two inseparable acts of subjectivation simultaneously, one of which constitutes a character in the first person, but the other one which is present at his birth and brings him on to the scene. There is no mixture or average of two subjects, each belonging but a differentiation of two correlative subjects in a system, which is present at his birth and brings him on to the scene. **There is no mixture or average of two subjects, each belonging to a system which is itself heterogeneity.**[my emphasis]³²⁹

We have seen similar heterogeneity ("there is no mixture or average") when discussing the co-existence of documentary's two claims. For Pasolini, such *free indirect discourse* is a conceptual model for the interplay of objectivity and subjectivity that takes place in cinema. In another variation on the question what does objectivity mean with respect to motion pictures, Pasolini likens subjective perception—e.g. rack focusing to signal a character's shifting attention—with direct discourse, such as first person narration. Indirect discourse, such as third person exposition, is for Pasolini analogous to objective perception.

Shots that clearly signal an objective perspective typically precede moments of optical POV. For example, we see a character looking at a gun on the table. These are the shots that Deleuze likens to *dicent signs*, or propositions. What makes shots of "characters looking" propositional is their ability to elicit from the viewer an assertion regarding the shot that follows. Deleuze explains: "the spectator sees the character in

³²⁹ Deleuze, *Movement-Image*, 73.

such a way as to be able, sooner or later, to state what the latter is supposed to be seeing."³³⁰ Our absolute certainty with regards to the beholder of the shot that follows makes these *dicent* shots exemplify, for Deleuze, "a solid state of perception."

Assuming cinema to have clear analogues of both third and first person narration, Deleuze and Pasolini argue that certain films exhibit *a free indirect subjective*. Like Bakhtin's "system that is itself heterogeneity" *a free indirect subjective* in film is not the simple co-presence of objectivity and subjectivity but rather the braiding of the two into an autonomous form of vision. "The camera does not simply give the vision of the character and of his world; it imposes another vision in which the first is transformed and reflected."³³¹ For Deleuze, this type of reflected vision is manifest in some European cinema of the post-World War II era.³³²

The mutual embedding of vision within a *free indirect subjective* allows film to transcend questions of objectivity and subjectivity altogether. Reflecting on the occurrence of *a free indirect subjective* Deleuze writes:

This is not to say that the cinema is always like this – we can see images in the cinema which claim to be objective of subjective – but here something else is at stake: it is a case of going beyond the subjective and the objective towards a pure Form which sets itself up as an autonomous vision of the content. We are no longer faced with subjective *or* objective images; **we are caught in a correlation between a perception-image and a camera consciousness which transforms it (the question of knowing whether the image was objective is no longer raised)** [my emphasis].³³³

Recall the sequence of the men reading the newspaper. It began with a clear division between subjective—POV insert of newspaper—and objective perception—shots of the men looking at the newspaper. But over the course of three iterations, the two modes of

³³⁰ Deleuze, *Movement-Image*, 72.

³³¹ Deleuze, *Movement-Image*, 74.

³³² It should be noted that Deleuze talks about Vertov at length in the *Cinema I*. His analysis is fascinating but focuses primarily on *The Man With the Movie Camera* and is thus outside the parameters of this work.

³³³ Deleuze, *Movement-Image*, 74.

vision entered into a correlation much like the one Deleuze describes above. The images were transformed by a "camera consciousness." While the correlation of objectivity and subjectivity in the newspaper sequence is similar to Deleuze's description of a *free indirect subjective*, the effect of such a correlation on the viewer is radically different in an informational medium such as *khronika* and in the films of Antonioni, Godard, Rohmer and Pasolini.

In films such as Pasolini's, a *poetic* consciousness emerges via a free indirect relationship between director and protagonist: "the images of the neurotic man or woman thus become the visions of the director, who advances and reflects *through* the phantasms of his hero."³³⁴ It is this fluidity between the director's and the protagonist's vision that made Pasolini's "etymological mistake" worth keeping. The Greek word *rheume*—"that which flows"—perfectly describes perception that is less than solid. In other words, Deleuze keeps the extra letter for the purposes of flow.

This discussion of *rheumes* and *dicents* may seem like a curious, all-too extended footnote with respect to *khronika*, until we return to the two question with which I began: how does Deleuze deviate from Peirce with his use of *dicent/rheme* and what does the deviation tell us about meaning in documentary? In his use of Peirce's terms Deleuze inverts their cardinal ordering. In Peirce, *rhemes* are included in the propositional *dicents*; both are contained in *arguments*. In Deleuze, the propositional certainty of *dicents* ("This is what Mr. Jeffries is seeing") makes them objective. The freeflowing *rheme* describes more poetic cinema. Inverting the cardinal ordering of *dicent* and *rheme* may be problematic for Deleuze's philosophy but it is accurate with respect to the evolution of film art. (What makes it problematic is not the deviation from Peirce—Deleuze makes no

³³⁴ Deleuze, *Movement-Image*, 74.

pretense of absolute fidelity—but his alignment with Bakhtin. Deleuze is famously an anti-dialectical thinker but in his film writing he adapts Bakhtin's idea of *free indirect discourse* as a dialectical synthesis, a higher order pairing of objectivity and subjectivity).

With respect to film history, Deleuze's ordering of *dicent* and *rheume* fits cinema's evolution. The principles of continuity editing—unrestricted observation, prevalence of shot/countershot patterns, etc.—buttressed a worldview beholden to the laws of Euclidean geometry, space and time, the reign of logic and reason. The emergence of art cinema with its weakened causality and characters bereft of explicit motivations is revealing of post-War Europe and is well rendered by *rheume* signs.

The certainty that characterizes the *dicent* is certainty about the mental space of a character. The *dicent* is gauged by the spectator's inscription of propositional content. Though not uncommon, the *dicent* is far from being the dominant sign in fiction films. It is common to genres that depend on the unequal distribution of information for their narrative momentum (e.g. detective films). The fixed frames that Deleuze describes are used to single out and convey important narrative details. Imagine a character being held hostage and glancing at the gun that is almost within reach. The excess of such certainty regarding a character's perspective, however, makes for uneasy viewing. To experience the discomfort of such optical certainty one need only to watch Robert Montgomery's 1947 *The Lady in The Lake*, a film noir that remains attached to a single optical POV for its entire 105-minute running time.

The viewer of documentary has a fundamentally different relationship to moments of such certainty. For early non-fiction, the need to maintain the certainty of a single optical POV was inseparable from the camera's purported ability to preserve a protocol of

an actual event. Transcending the formal conventions of the *view aesthetic*, *khronika* became a platform for the development of rhetorical or evidentiary continuity characterized by an activated spectator. And it is in the context of the viewer's *rhetorical response* that the certainty brought by the *dicent sign* becomes salient.

In the early *Kino-Pravda* experiments, the *dicent sign* was a ground-level technique that prompts the spectator to inscribe meaning into the image. Rather than using the certainty of the *dicent* shot to establish the subjectivity of a given character, *Kino-Pravda* shows people reading, looking, reacting. Such shots bestow a second-order objectivity on the material. Such objectivity is characterized by perception that is shared by multiple subjects. In Deleuze's term, such perception is "desubjectivized." In *Kino-Pravda*, the *dicent* shots of readers introduce moments of optical/mental POV. But the POV shots that follow do not represent the fixation of a single subjective perspective, as in fiction, but instead create a kind of historical objectivity by virtue of the images being shared by many observers/perceivers.

As a testament to this, recall that the *dicent shots* in *Kino-Pravda* rarely feature a single person. Instead the shots of characters looking show multiple observers sharing a single perspective, as in the image of the two men reading a single newspaper together.



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³³⁵ *Kino-Pravda* #17

The shot of the newspaper readers above gives the viewer certainty that the image to follow is beholden to their point of view. The point of view that follows is a shared consciousness that synthesizes the two men and the content of the newspaper into a single entity. For Deleuze, the spectator's affirmation of the proposition—this image is seen by this subject—was a litmus test for the *dicent shot*. The analogous proposition for the newspaper sequence would state that 'this image is shared by many.' Rather than shackle the image to a single consciousness, such a proposition bestows on the images that follow a communal, desubjectivized status.

The transition from one to several beholders alters the question that the *dicent shot* prompts from the spectator. When the images represent collective perception, the question no longer concerns the shot's significance for a single character (e.g. the gun as a way of escaping certain death). Instead, one is prompted to consider the image's meaning for the collective as a whole. Inscribing general significance into the material expands the shot's meaning, giving it a kind universality and nominality. Earlier newsreel compilations such as *The Anniversary of the Revolution* annotated and contextualized the event recorded. With *dicent shots*, *Kino-Pravda* begins to present images as questions that, in order to be consummated as history, require a response from the spectator.

Cinematic moments such as these enact a communal and interactive writing of history.

When applied to *khronika* the terms *rheme* and *dicent* stand for the possibility and the materialization of propositional meaning, respectively. The transition from the potential to bear propositions to actually expressing them is facilitated by images of reading, which signaled to early viewers the linguistic articulation of the images that follow. In this way, documentary realized its second claim.

Though *khronika*'s ordering of *rhemes* and *dicents* is more faithful to Peirce's semiotics, documentary's relationship to his theory of meaning is a fraught one nonetheless. As we've discussed earlier, placing an explicit "I see" into the filmic space fulfills one of Peirce's key insights: "the meaning of a representation can be nothing but a representation."³³⁶ Yet holding on to the distinction between meaning and representation, the very distinction that Peirce's semiotic overturns, has been a staple of documentary discourse from the very beginning, starting with the tendency to equate individual shots with discrete historical events.

By introducing an "I see" into the filmic space, Vertov discovers a formal technique that allowed *khronika* to make two claims. Without relying on grammatical structures or titles, the images come to bear propositions and to be linguistically articulated. By creating the position of an observer inside the space of the film, Vertov discovers the possibility of a *free indirect objective* that integrates perception and mental imaging. While such integration was a step forward, it also referenced a trope inherited from early-non fiction film: the presumption of a fixed observer. The difference, of course, is that in *Kino-Pravda* the observer is no longer a pair of eyes fixed to a physical location. The new observer combines perception and imagination and is therefore not restricted by the strictures of space or time. Instead of a physical unity, the union of *kino-eye*'s experience—measured in meters of film stock and arranged according to the theory of intervals—becomes the new axis around which *khronika* is organized.

³³⁶ Peirce, *Collected Works* vol. 2, 339.

xiv. Kino-Eye as automatism

Like most film history, the history of documentary, particularly its early history, tends to be told in terms of schools and figureheads: the British Empire Marketing Board and John Grierson, Basil Wright, Paul Rotha; the popular anthropology of Americans Robert Flaherty, Cooper & Schoedsock, Martin and Osa Johnson; the Soviet documentary tradition led by Vertov, Esfir Shub, Vladimir Erofeev; the European Avant-Gardists – Ruttman, Ivens, Cavalcanti; Pare Lorentz and the work produced by the American Workers' Film and Photo League.³³⁷

Though the names of institutions that sponsored many of the first documentaries are acknowledged, the institutional impact on the films themselves is rarely taken up. The "film as art" bias and an *auteurist* outlook on documentary have led many to overlook the question of what it was that documentaries were expected to say and how they learned to say it. Consider the following comparison of *Kino-Pravda* and Flaherty's films in Ellis and McLane's recent history of documentary:

Most people would find the aesthetic experience offered by "Kino-Pravda" less satisfying than that of *Nanook* or *Moana*. Vertov's images are more restricted and didactic in intent than are Flaherty's. At the same time they seem less carefully composed, even cluttered and unlovely. The editing continuity is rougher, the action fragmented. The resultant style could be called naturalistic nitty-gritty – as opposed to naturalist (romantic), as Rotha called Flaherty's work. If "Kino-Pravda" is less an artwork than are Flaherty's films, the cause was not that Vertov was incapable of achieving artistic expression – he would gravitate towards it. Rather, for the kind of filmmaking represented by "Kino-Pravda," beauty would be thought of as a distraction.³³⁸

All of the points made are accurate and, to their credit, McLane and Ellis go on to describe *Kino-Pravda's* journalistic pedigree and the "interactivity" in Vertov's view of

³³⁷ For an example of a history structured in this way see the recent Ellis Jack C. and Betsy McLane *A New History of Documentary Film* (New York: Continuum, 2007).

³³⁸ Ellis and McClane, *A New History of Documentary Film*, 33.

documentary audiences. Yet setting "aesthetic experience" as the horizon of the discussion obfuscates what to my mind are the most important questions about documentary as a medium.

Armed with a modernist insistence on art's autonomy, documentary criticism has been prone to limit judgment, analysis, and comparison to aesthetic matters. It responds to the question of how film says what it says, by looking at just the *how*, rather than at both the *how* and the *what*. To be sure, this predicament permeates many spheres of cultural criticism and informs the cultural reception of art, more generally. The musicologist Richard Taruskin captures the analogous quagmire in classical music with the wonderfully acerbic remark about contemporary performances of the opera *Lady MacBeth of Mtsensk*: "Well-dressed audiences are trained to pay high prices to watch the antics of Shostakovich's multiple murderess yet think about nothing except the quality of her singing voice."³³⁹

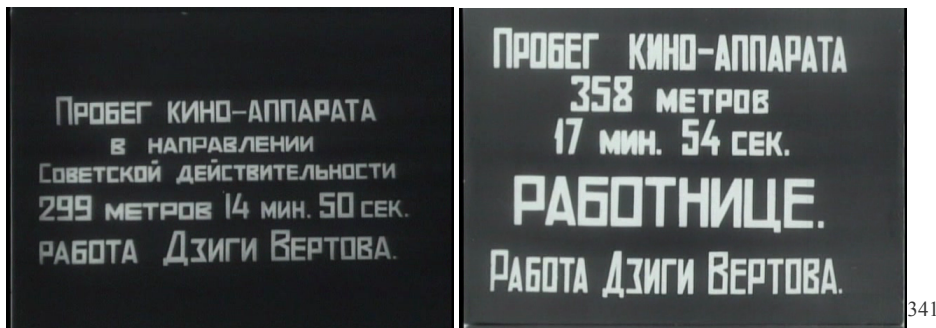
Throughout this work, I have referred to documentary as a medium, in some part, to circumnavigate the art bias in my own thinking. Though Vertov plays a crucial role in documentary's emergence, I have focused on *khronika* as a historical concept and as an emerging medium for information delivery. For Stanley Cavell, a medium emerges alongside the creation of *automatisms*, a term that encompasses the technological foundations of a medium (i.e. the automatism of photography) as well as "the forms, conventions, or genres that arise creatively out of the existing materials and material conditions of given art practices."³⁴⁰ As we have seen, the *kino-eye* arose in a similar way, as a response to concrete organizational challenges.

³³⁹ Taruskin, Richard *The Danger of Music* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008), 4.

³⁴⁰ Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film*, 42.

At the end of the previous section, I mentioned that the *kino-eye* replaced the observer's physical embodiment in the space of the film with a mental unity capable of synthesizing perception, making optical perception and mental imaging indiscernible in the process. The importance of a shift from an assumed physical to an imagined mental unity extends beyond Vertov to documentary as a medium.

Following the experiment of *Kino-Pravda* #17, issues 18 and 19 both begin by proposing that what follows will be 'movie camera races.' Both are introduced with the running time written out first as distance (*KP*#18 – 299 meters; *KP*#19 – 358 meters) and then again as running time. The subtitle of *KP*#18 goes one step further and admixes physical travel with an abstract destination: *A Movie Camera Race over 299 Meters and 14 Minutes and 50 Seconds in the Direction of Soviet Reality*.



It is easy to dismiss Vertov's likening of the movie camera to trains, automobiles and other dynamic machines as his personal fetishism of the movie camera or as an extension of his Futurist love of machines. As a film technique, however, the premise of a movie camera race ingeniously subverts established rules of continuity by making them secondary to the film's running time—a unity external to the events on screen. The first

³⁴¹ *Kino-Pravda* #18/#19

sequence of *KP#18* makes it clear that spatial relations no longer determine the sequence of shots. The issue begins with the movie camera's ascent to the top of the Eiffel Tower on the occasion of its engineer's recent death.



By the time this issue comes out, *Kino-Pravda* was no longer a vehicle for current events. The responsibility for topical *khronika* had shifted over to *Goskino-Calendar* and several other journals. Still, the mention of Gustave Eiffel's death implies a sequence that depicts the event or, at least, commemorates the engineer's greatest achievement. Yet, all such expectations are immediately thwarted. Instead of a view from the top, external views of the tower, or a descent from the tower, the ascent is followed by the movie camera's descent on Soviet territory rendered as a point of view shot of a plane landing in a field.



This ascent/descent pairing makes the point that it is the camera's movement that determines the logic of transition and not the events on screen. In other words, film

³⁴² *Kino-Pravda* #18

³⁴³ *Kino-Pravda* #18

language is determined not by the observed events but by the particularities of the implied observer, the film conscience uniting the events together. Spatially unrelated ascents and descents are united by the camera's participation in both.

This ascent/descent figure, however, is not merely an example of what Lev Kuleshov and Vsevolod Pudovkin describe as *creative geography*. Recall that according to Tom Gunning the transition from a *cinema of attractions* to a system of *narrative integration* made framing, editing, point-of-view, and *mise-en-scène* subservient to the task of narration. The transition to continuity editing actively engaged the spectator in the suturing together of physical space. The logic by which the spectator pieced together the spaces in *A Drunkard's Reformation*, to use Gunning's example, is determined by the actions and the externalized psychology of the characters.

No such externalization of action or motivation informs the camera's races in *Kino-Pravda*. Without explicit motivations, the transitions from one shot to another become sites that must be interpreted by the viewer. Though we recognize that it is the camera's movement from Paris to the Soviet Union that justifies the ascent-descent figure, the logic behind the transition is to be provided by the viewer who interprets it as a move from past industrial marvels in France towards the present-day marvel that is Soviet reality.

The movie-camera races in *Kino-Pravda* maintain an allegiance to two metaphors: the camera as a machine traveling through space and the camera as a mental entity. The two metaphors are upheld by the vacillation between optical perception and mental imaging. The first third of *KP#18* emphasizes the camera's recording capacity by showing snatches of daily life in Moscow. The parallel editing between urban distraction

(window shopping, looking at the posters for the latest fiction dramas, etc.) and the economic problems that still remain (e.g. the recurrence of the begging pauper) creates dialectic but there is no apparent synthesis, mental or otherwise. As in the previous issue, most of the title cards in the first section are one word long—*Pauper, Manufacture, Cinema, Cigarettes, Paper Boy*—and do not provide causal or interpretive links. Most of the shots are shown twice, recurrences in the flux of urban life. The impression created is of a series of records snatched by the camera during its frenetic race.

The metaphor of the camera as a form of consciousness is never entirely absent in the first part of the issue either. In the second sequence, which aligns the camera's race with an actual auto-race, we catch a glimpse shot of cinematographer Mikhail Kaufman's cast shadow.



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Notwithstanding such obvious clues, the transition from perception to mental imaging happens organically and, once again, by way of the newspaper. The shot of a paper-boy running alongside a tram cuts to a shot of a man reading the newspaper, and is then followed by a title card that imitates newspaper text and declares that the construction of a large worker's club in Moscow is complete.

³⁴⁴ *Kino-Pravda* #18



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The appearance of the newspaper marks the beginning of transition to more abstract political content: shots of the worker's palace, text outlining the party's goals, workers and peasants solidifying their "Alliance" with a handshake. The transition towards such mental imaging, however, is not total. It is interspersed with driving shots that hearken back to the issue's metaphor of travel through space and the indiscriminate recording of encountered phenomena.

In the second part of *KP#18* the braiding of physical travel and mental subjectivity is achieved by linking the camera's eye to the experience of a single character, the peasant tourist Vasili Siriakov who travels from his village to attend the Industry and Agriculture exhibition (i.e. the subject of *KP#17*). Immediately after introducing Siriakov we are also shown the shadow of his fellow traveler, the movie camera that, as the title tells us, follows him around.



³⁴⁵ *Kino-Pravda #18*



Though the camera is linked to a conscious agent, the depiction of physical travel from the Yaroslav region to the exhibition in Moscow desubjectivizes perception. During the first leg of the journey the emphasis is on Siriakov's point of view: the bicyclist, the car running alongside the tram, the passengers sitting across from him inside the tram etc. As the journey continues, we are no longer limited to the peasant's perspective. The traveling shots expand to include aerial and driving shots and are not connected to Siriakov's immediate experience. The effect is twofold. First, to distinguish an individual's perspective from third person observation and draw a tentative line between objective and subjective perception. Second, to unite the objective and subjective in movement. Both Siriakov's POV and the shots detached from him show movement towards the exhibition.

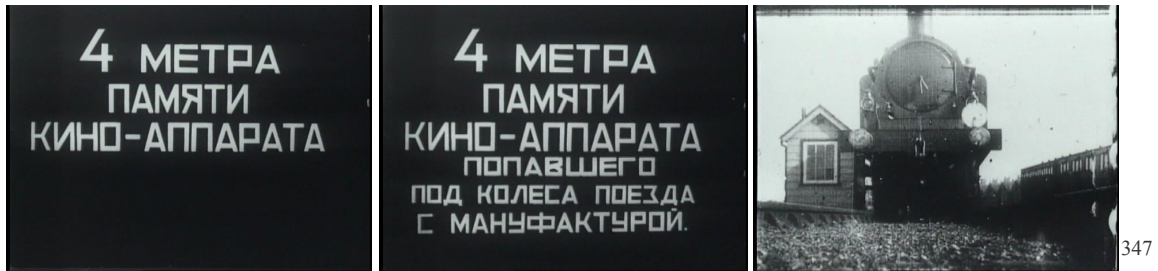
This split in perspective prepares the ground for a synthesis that takes place when Siriakov actually reaches his destination. When the camera re-aligns with him (listening to speeches, exploring the exhibition, looking at Lenin's portrait) the viewer is prompted to experience the shots more universally, since the preceding sequence has insisted that the journey is communal and not restricted to one individual's subjectivity. An interplay of observer and observed is present in fiction film but the axis of action remains the individual character. In *khronika*, the interplay of subjective and objective perception

³⁴⁶ *Kino-Pravda* #18

makes the spectator into such an axis. Though this is not always the case, protagonists such as Siriakov are not fully-fledged characters as in a fiction film but proxies for the viewer, embodied observers used to direct our interpretive activity.

Like its predecessor, *Kino-Pravda #19* adapts the metaphor of travel and likewise correlates physical movement through space with interpretive activity. *KP#19* makes one important addition to the camera-as-consciousness metaphor and endows the camera with the capacity for memory. From the Eiffel tower to the "Soviet baptism" at a factory, the camera's race in *KP#18* was predicated on the idea of movement through a series of consecutive presents. In other words, the camera's experience was limited to movement through space and the recording of visual phenomena. The suggestion of the camera's interpretive activity arose largely through the camera's attachment to human agents depicted on the screen (e.g. the men reading the newspaper, the peasant traveling to Moscow etc).

In *KP #19* the movie camera becomes capable of distinguishing the historical past from the present moment of recording. The idea is introduced towards the end of the issue with a shot of a train. Prior to then, *KP#19*, like the previous issue, presented a panorama of Soviet reality as a travelogue. The camera's gains a new ability with the following title: *Four meters in the memory of a movie camera that was caught under the wheels of a train delivering industrial goods.*



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The image of the train represents the exchange of flour for industrial goods—another manifestation of the urban-rural alliance. But the real significance is the emphasis on *metric memory*: the camera's ability to return to moments recognized as the historical past.

At first glance, it is not clear why Vertov introduces the idea of a camera's *metric memory* with this train sequence. The answer lies in the next scene. Following the delivery of agricultural equipment, *KP#19* shows several shots of female textile workers and shots of women unloading coal. These serve as the transition to the all-female Congress held in honor of International Women's Day on March 8th, 1924. A series of static shots shows a full meeting hall. A title card, laid out in newspaper, reports the speaker's opening words: "*our first thought is of the leader.*"



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³⁴⁷ *Kino-Pravda #19*

³⁴⁸ *Kino-Pravda #19*

The title is followed by a standing ovation and a shot of Lenin's body in his casket, *Kino-Pravda's* first acknowledgment of his passing.³⁴⁹

The mention of "thought" together with the image of Lenin's coffin introduces mental imaging into a sequence that started as a record of an event. As before, the newspaper font in the intertitle suggests shared perception, an idea that is immediately confirmed by the crowd standing up in unison. The following shots reveal why the idea of memory needed to be introduced in the previous scene.

A title appears: "*Alive*" and shots of Lenin, alive and campaigning, follow.



At this moment, *khronika* discovers the historical past.³⁵¹ In less than ten seconds the movie camera journeys between two historical eras. To our trained eyes and minds, the transition from Lenin resting in a coffin to Lenin standing on a tribunal presents few conceptual challenges. Such interpretive comfort was not there for many of Vertov's viewers. It is unlikely that even those encountering cinema for the very first time believed that Lenin came back to life in actual fact, as the apocryphal stories of audience members trying to escape the oncoming train during Lumiere's first screenings suggest. But the interpretive competency needed to make the conceptual transition may not have been

³⁴⁹ As further testament to *Kino-Pravda's* transition from of topical newsworthy content that issue 18, released March 1924 never mentions Lenin's death and issue 19 introduces it indirectly, by way of a women's congress.

³⁵⁰ *Kino-Pravda* #19

³⁵¹ The footage comes from Civil War agit-films and had been used in earlier issues of *Kino-Pravda*.

fully in place either for many early viewers. The possibility of an implied now/then transition, a basic rhetorical figure, was not yet fully established as an automatism of *khronika*, a medium that had until then only recorded and serialized time.

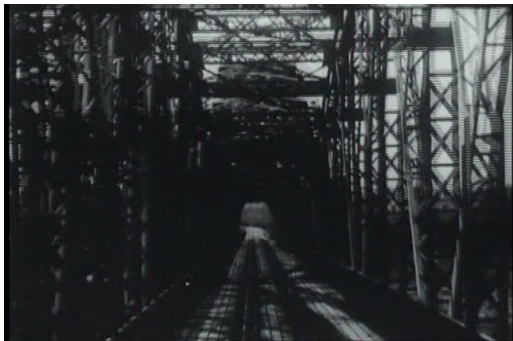
Executions, along with other passages from life to death, were a popular early film attraction.³⁵² Reverse motion existed as a visual attraction but it had not, to my knowledge, been applied to newsreel and topical films. At the risk of sounding tautological, I wish to underscore that going against chronology was deeply antithetical to the idea of *khronika* as it was understood at the time. The reigning assumption was that *khronika*, as the name implies, moved in the same direction as time's arrow. To be sure, chronology was not always placed front and center. The newsreel journal template, a series of distinct events, downplayed the significance of chronology outside of the individual story. But conceptually time defined an event's logic on the screen.

The relationship between shot transitions and chronology begins to change in the early issues of *Kino-Pravda*. With the *kino-eye* the logic of the shot transition begins to drive the film and not the chronology of events. This shift lays the groundwork for "intellectual montage" but it is foundational in other ways as well. With respect to documentary spectatorship, moments such as Lenin's re-animation signal a Copernican revolution of sorts, to borrow Kant's metaphor. In other words, the viewing of actuality footage shifts from being a proxy for an eyewitness encounter and comes to mimic the mental experience of inscribing logical relations and propositional content into the

³⁵² Thomas Edison's films are particularly notable in this regard. Even before the well-known *Electrocution of an Elephant* (1903), Edison had recreated historical executions as in *The Execution of Mary Stuart* (1895) but also re-enacted some as in *Shooting of Captured Insurgents* (1898) a film made to generate support for Cuban rebels during the Spanish-American war, was, like many early war actualities, a re-enactment that was presented without clarification and seen as real. And the actual execution of President McKinley's assassin Leon Czolgosz, *Execution of Czolgosz with Panorama of Auburn Prison*. The baffling title speaks volumes about the equalizing force that visual curiosity extended over early non-fiction film.

footage. Such a shift augurs an entirely new mode of cinematographic seeing, one predicated on the idea of a spectator's rhetorical response to the material. *Kino-eye's* contribution to the story of documentary's origins lies in its ability to offer an alternative organizational model, one not so beholden to the chronology of the event itself.³⁵³

The inherent difficulty that *newsreel* audiences may have had in breaking with sequential time, and making interpretive leaps may be why Vertov frequently returns his audience to the metaphor of the physical journey underway. Immediately after showing footage of Lenin campaigning, *KP#19* realigns with the metaphor of the physical journey, rendered via the image of the moving train, across space, and also across historical time.



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The issue began with the very same image of train rails. The return to it following the shots of Lenin campaigning suggests a bookend, the final meters of the race. But this is not the end. There is one more short sequence, one more reveal in store. A title appears: *Selecting the Negative for Kino-Pravda #19*. It is followed by shots of Vertov's wife, the editor Elizaveta Svilova, cutting material for the issue just seen.

As the sequence moves between Svilova and her POV of the negative, we see yet another variant of the *dicent shot*.

³⁵³ It should be mentioned that overcoming chronology (and using space instead) is typical of modernism in general. Frank's essay on the "widening gyre" comes to mind. Also, there's a familiar and distinct Russian cultural trope of reanimation (e.g. Fyodorov). The difference with film is that given the strength of the mimetic impulse, breaking into the chronological order become much more difficult.

³⁵⁴ *Kino-Pravda #19*



The issue's last shot is a close-up on Svilova's eyes reading the images. Another metafilmic turn in the issue's final sequence can be said to muddy the metaphor of the camera's race through space and time by introducing another *mise en abyme* figure into the mix. Yet this final sequence, like the travel metaphors, only reinforces the point that the ordering of filmed events is determined by an external consciousness. Top-lit, Svilova appears as a spectral figure of sorts, all-powerful, overriding the boundary between life and death.

As examples of the *kino-eye's* earliest incarnations, the camera races were one solution to the question of how non-narrative documentary material could be organized into a longer entity. The camera's journey replaced an event's chronology with the notion of an active, deciphering spectator. This was effectively a new paradigm for processing motion pictures. This paradigm makes possible a *free indirect objective* by making making optical perception and mental imaging indistinguishable.

³⁵⁵ *Kino-Pravda* #19

Following the two film-camera races in issues *KP#18* and *KP#19*, Vertov attempts to apply a similar organizational principles to the full-length (six-reel) *khronika* film: *Kino-Eye on Its First Reconnaissance: First Episode of the Cycle "Life Caught Off-Guard."* Released on October 31, 1924, it is the first Vertov film that most viewers today would recognize as a documentary feature. Though its six sections are interconnected, *Kino-Eye* proceeds without a clear narrative thread or persistent protagonist. As in the previous issues of *Kino-Pravda*, the organizational axis is the presence of the movie camera itself. Though the trope may have been effective for three-reel newsreel journals, contemporary reviews suggest that it was not quite enough to hold six reels together. The film's length and its non-chronological organization proved to be something of a challenge for viewers. According to a *Pravda* review by Boris Gusman:

The basic shortcoming of the film is that these episodes are totally unconnected. There is no single pivot which all these episodes can revolve around. The viewer's train of thought, aroused by the beginning of an episode, is disrupted when the film moves on to the next subject, only to be aroused again for some other reason. Jolts of this kind exhaust the viewer's attention, and this is exacerbated by tricks with montage and editing. . . There are also signs of [excess] in the montage. Certain places, thanks to the montage, take on a tempo which is completely alien to our life (and yet isn't this supposed to be life caught 'unawares'?)³⁵⁶

Gusman's analysis is both a valid critique of the film and an invaluable portrait of the *khronika* spectator of 1924. As the author explains later on in the same review, part of the film's difficulty was rooted in distinguishing whether a particular shot was merely recording a specific event or being used to illustrate a particular theme:

What can be the significance of the episodes in the Kanatchikova Dacha madhouse and the ambulance car? What relationship do they have to the struggle of the New and the Old which we observe in the first parts? This remains incomprehensible, and it makes it possible to consider the picture to be simply *khronika*, whereas its significance is undoubtedly wider.³⁵⁷

³⁵⁶ Gusman, Boris, "О Кино-Глазе" in *Lines of Resistance*, 102-103.

³⁵⁷ Gusman, "О Кино-Глазе," 103.

Gusman's reasoning reveals that newsreel continued to be understood via a dichotomy. The material could either function as a record ("simply *khronika*") of an individual event or as an illustration of a theme, proposition, or caption ("New and the Old"). Yet what we've seen in the run-up to *Kino-Eye* is precisely the development of a method that transcended this dichotomy and presented themes as organically emerging out of simple records.

Some early reviewers did understand this and accepted the camera's journey as the new model for receiving non-fiction motion pictures. Writing about an early cut of the film, one reviewer described the film's premise as follows:

The Kino-Eye – the movie camera and two or three people – has gone off on a journey from the Pioneer camp, through the peasant courtyards, through the fields, through the markets and slums of the town, with an ambulance car to a dying man, from there to workers' sports grounds, and so on and so forth, peering into all the little corners of social life.³⁵⁸

Though the above critic does not go beyond describing the camera's journey, he understands that the camera is what makes the film into a cohesive unity. Perceived by the camera, the discrete shots retain their individuality and evidentiary status, but cease to be direct illustrations of pre-given themes or propositions. Instead, the shots become components of the camera's experience as such, their meaning varying over the course of the film.

There is evidence that Vertov foresaw the difficulty posed by his new approach. Speaking before *Kino-Eye*'s very first screening, Vertov warned the people in the audience that they would be disappointed if they came expecting an enthralling love story or an absorbing thriller. In place of taut narrative, Vertov promoted the film's open-endedness and its unity of observer:

³⁵⁸ Tsivian ed., *Lines of Resistance*, 99.

if you take note that what we are going to show you now is just a reconnaissance by a single movie camera feeling its way, if you bear in mind that it's only the first part, one-sixth of the first journey of the Kino-Eye. Then even these simple little pieces of life, filmed as they are and not acted out, will give you a certain satisfaction.³⁵⁹

Given the bombast that permeates much of Vertov's writing, the understatement on display ("a certain satisfaction") signals apprehension.

The film presents itself as the first in a series of six episodes entitled "Life Caught Unawares." Those seeing *Kino-Eye* in 1924 most likely associated the idea of a multi-part series with the adventure serials, a film genre beloved in Russia after being made famous by Pearl White in Pathé's *Perils of Pauline* (1914) and Helen Holmes in *The Hazards of Helen* (1914-1917). The association is significant as the idea of serialization reinforced *khronika*'s open-endedness with respect to the whole. The emphasis on a larger whole existing outside the film can also be said to encompass documentary's relationship to the reality it recreates through fragments.

Like many adventure serials, which begin *in medias res* with the protagonist in a life-threatening and exotic locale, *Kino-Eye* places its so-called "hero" in an analogously exotic environment. The first reel's opening title reads: *Kino-Eye at the Church Holiday or The Effect of Moonshine on the Village Women*. The camera's physical embodiment, implied by the title card, is immediately confirmed by the use of an iris-shaped matte to suggest the gradual opening of an eye. Furthermore, the shot order mimics an observer who lifts his gaze from the ground, up to the women's torsos and finally looks above their heads.³⁶⁰

³⁵⁹ Vertov, Dziga "Вступительное слово," speech delivered on October 13, 1924. RGALI 2091-2-93.

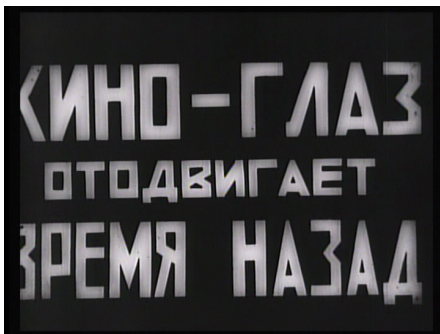
³⁶⁰ A similar motif is introduced in the first reel of *The Man With The Movie Camera* built on cutting between the opening of window shutters, a woman waking up and opening her eyes, and the dilation of a camera's iris.



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The alternation of low and high-angles is a pattern that runs throughout the film. It is particularly noticeable in the interaction of young pioneer scouts with adults. Mikhail Kaufman does not adjust the camera height, shooting from a height between adult and child height to emphasize the camera's independence.

The camera's physical embodiment recalls the aesthetic of the view. Except in *Kino-Eye*, as in previous camera races, the impression of physical embodiment is not an aesthetic end to be maintained throughout the film but an initial premise, an introductory pivot around which physical perception, mental imaging, and propositional encoding can begin to coalesce. The camera's initial physical presence is just a point of immersion. Having established the *kno-eye*'s power as an optical tool, its other capacities become apparent soon after. *Kino-eye*'s ability to subvert spatio-temporal continuity follows with a demonstration of beef production, which traces a commodity back to its origins in the real world. The title card that prefaces the scene states: *Kino-eye moves time backwards*.



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³⁶¹ *Kino-Eye* framegrab. DVD: Kino Lorber, 2004.

As with the re-animation of Lenin, prefacing the scene by spelling out *kino-eye's* ability to impact the images helps viewer make the shift from seeing the footage as a record of an event to interpreting its significance. Such a shift in the viewer's orientation laces the footage with questions of agency and intentionality.

Documentary spectatorship, in general, can be characterized by the persistence of the question 'what is this telling me?' in the viewer's mind. The awareness of the *kino-eye* as an agent involved in the production of footage prompts this very question as well.

Though Vertov makes no explicit references to the viewer as an agent that actualizes meaning, he does begin to describe his film work, around the time of *Kino-Eye*, using terms that evoke the notion of a communication act: "we only film facts and then transmit them through the screen into the consciousness of the workers."³⁶³ Considered in the context of *Kino-Pravda's* formal innovations—*affect*, direct address, grammatical substitutions, *kino-races* etc.—the statement suggests that the transmission Vertov has in mind is based on a participatory model of communication and not the more unidirectional model inherited from print journalism and early newsreel journals. The notion of participatory communication reaches its peak in *Kino-Eye*, where it is developed into an idea of communal authorship, *per se*.

Drawing on parallels between the work of the film camera and the agitational activities of the Pioneer Scouts, John MacKay has traced the representation of the Scouts as a "mass" in the film and has convincingly argued that *Kino-Eye* is Vertov's most direct exploration of a film as the product of a mass author.³⁶⁴ Mass newsreel production was

³⁶² *Kino-Eye* framegrab.

³⁶³ Tsivian ed., *Lines of Resistance*, 94.

³⁶⁴ MacKay, *Dziga Vertov*, *Kino-Eye* chapter, 3.

something Vertov discussed frequently, imagining himself and his immediate collaborators (the *Kino-Eye* group) as leading the movement:

At the head stands the Kinoglaz [Kino-Eye] council, which consists of one Film-Scout representative, a representative of Scout-supporters who belong to no organization, and three film producer representatives. Transfer of authorship to the people. A Goskino-cell of the kinocs as a teaching a demonstration workshop which introduces the Pioneer- and Komsomol film groups to production work. The world with the eyes of millions.³⁶⁵

One could argue that the idea of mass authorship continues the shift towards greater levels of shared vision, a shift already on display in *Kino-Pravda* and *Kino-Eye*. While "the world with the eyes of millions" did not become a reality of Soviet newsreel production, the films themselves facilitated precisely the kind of communal world-making and remaking Vertov envisioned. As I've tried to show, "the transfer of authorship to the people" was first enacted at the level of the individual shot through formal techniques that suggested the shared ownership of vision.

"*Kino-Eye* is not the goal. It is the means."³⁶⁶ The means to do what? The first reviews of the film suggest it was the means to make a film without a plot. This could serve both as a point of praise and, as in Gusman's review, one of criticism. Seen in a positive light, *kino-eye* was recognized as an alternative approach to organizing film material. That is how Walther Ruttmann understood it. After seeing the film, he announced his intent to make a symphonic film (*Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Grosstadt*) using the *kino-eye* method.³⁶⁷

Vertov recognized that his new method was in need of greater development. Writing with uncharacteristic candor and transparency, Vertov pointed to a lack of

³⁶⁵ Tode and Wurm, eds., *Dziga Vertov*, 95.

³⁶⁶ Roshal, *Дзига Вертов*, 70.

³⁶⁷ Roshal, *Дзига Вертов*, 197.

cohesion in *Kino-Eye* due to its 6-reel length. The leap to feature length, he concedes, may have been premature:

The film's excessive length should be mentioned as its chief shortcoming. We must not forget that artistic films were also one- or two-reel in the beginning and that their footage was only gradually increased.

The field of kino-eye is a new one, and the portion being served to the viewer should be increased cautiously to avoid tiring him and shoving him into the arms of the art drama.

Hoping to break into the big movie theaters, we yielded to the demand to provide a six-act film and...made a mistake; this has to be admitted. We must correct this mistake in the future and make small objects of various types that can be shown individually or in a group program as desired.³⁶⁸

Despite the above suggestion that he would be returning to shorter formats, Vertov continued his pursuit of feature-length filmmaking. Both *Stride, Soviet!* and *A Sixth Part of the World* followed less than a year and a half after *Kino-Eye*. Both films were the results of high-level commissions, by the Moscow City Council and the State Trading Organization, respectively. Most importantly, both films continued to work with the organizational techniques first attempted in *Kino-Pravda*. By comparison, the films appear more confident in their method and do less to remind and instruct audiences about the ways that *kino-eye* organizes and transforms perception.

Occasionally shown as *2000 Meters in the Land of the Bolsheviks*, *Stride, Soviet!* (1926) is a camera race based on a speech given by a member of the Moscow Soviet. The film takes as its subject the daily life and labor of a city. It showcases the government's accomplishments through variations on the tropes of then and now, yesterday and today. Excepting the film's title, explicit evocation of a camera's physical journey is largely absent from the film. The conceit of a camera's physical race, much like the its ability to recall the past and to juxtapose it with the present, were no longer lessons that had to be

³⁶⁸ Vertov, *Kino-Eye*, 76.

taught to spectators. Assumed to be self-evident, the metaphor of the camera race in *Stride, Soviet* becomes the implicit infrastructure holding together a series of rhetorical figures and zigzags across space and time.

Made concurrently with *Stride* and released at the end of 1926, *A Sixth Part of the World* was another variation of the camera race.³⁶⁹ Notwithstanding its globe-spanning trajectory, *A Sixth Part* relies primarily on the idea of the camera as a unified mental entity and repeatedly foregrounds the unity of perception within a single consciousness. The proclamation *I see* (вижу) recurs throughout the film as a visual *cogito* of sorts. Physical travel through space is made subservient to this perceptual unity, which becomes the film's axis. As in previous films, the *I see* makes perception and mental imaging indiscernible. Moreover, in *A Sixth Part of the World* the *I see* allows direct address to take place. The film's Whitmanesque catalogues are typically prefaced with a direct address (*You*) that spans both the film's spectators (e.g. *You, sitting in the movie theatre*) and its many subjects (e.g. *You, eating raw reindeer meat*). In this way the film speaks both to and for its viewers in a kind of final confirmation of the *kino-eye's* existence as simultaneously inside and outside the film space.

I began this section by referring to *kino-eye* as an automatism of the documentary medium. As a formal technique, it facilitated the loosening of non-fiction's connection to its referent by creating spectators who no longer simply looked *through* the image onto the real world but actively looked *at* the image as a signifying entity. The *kino-eye's* development, as I've charted it, has been a constellation of premises, which transformed

³⁶⁹ For more on the films connection to early travelogues see "Across One Sixth of the World: Dziga Vertov, Travel Cinema, and Soviet Patriotism" *October* 121.

optical perceptions into filmic imitations of thought. Together, these premises solicited from the spectator the linguistic articulation needed to make documentary propositional.

The implications of the spectator's rhetorical response, which the *kino-eye* triggered, extend beyond Soviet newsreel into the use of photographic images more generally. According to WJT Mitchell, we are currently undergoing a *visual turn* in culture, a time when information increasingly reaches as a combination of visual and verbal elements. I take this to mean that we increasingly respond to documentary images as if they're trying to tell us something rather than seeing them as simple records of the past. Many of the premises and assumptions that *Kino-Pravda* used to organize newsreel material are defaults and templates in today's non-fiction media. In this light, these earliest attempts to deliver information using motion pictures are privileged case studies for understanding our current media environment.

While there is significant overlap in the formal conventions of silent fiction film and non-fiction, I have tried to show that the latter stands-out because of the urgency with which it faced with the question of information delivery. Though early Soviet fiction films were propagandistic they were not expected to explicate abstract social issues or to expose the causal factors that brought certain realities into being. Yet these were the stated goals of propaganda – goals that Vertov and his kinoks adapted as their own.

Earlier, when discussing *khronika's* relationship to montage theory, I proposed that a montage perspective on these films was somewhat limiting. Soviet montage theory, especially the model that emerges in Eisenstein's early writings, emphasized the creation of meaning through collision, a collision of two hieroglyphics creating a third: a drop of water and an eye yielding a tear, or, to borrow an example from Eisenstein's *October*, an

image of Kerensky and the peacock generating a mental image of a haughty despot. Yet the requirements of propaganda required uncovering the causal nexus at work in reality. This made the production of meaning through editing less significant than the stimulation of the viewer's rational development as a response to the images. What was needed was not the kino-fist that Eisenstein promoted, but a *kino-eye*.

Eisenstein's tendency to distinguish meaning from its constituent elements was at the heart of Vertov's critique of him. Writing to Khrisanf Khersonsky in 1926, Vertov advised him not "to repeat Eisenstein's extremely coarse mistake and make a subdivision between "seeing and showing" and "convincing and proving."³⁷⁰ Setting aside the question of whether this is a fair critique of Eisenstein's theory, the comment underscores Vertov's awareness of his own film practice as denying a fixed boundary between perception, mental imaging, and propositional content. Echoing Peirce's insight that the meaning of a representation can only be a representation, Vertov believed that the various gradations of perception were all encompassed in what he described as "sighted consciousness."

³⁷⁰ Roshal, *Дзига Вертов*, 61.

xv. The Production of Facts.

Were Vertov's films *khronika*? No one was quite sure. Though Vertov continued to identify himself as a *khronika* filmmaker, a critical consensus stated that his films could no longer be described as such. For many, the question of whether or not Vertov's films qualified as newsreel was connected to the absence or presence of plot. In a favorable review of *Stride, Soviet!* G. Osipov wrote:

Here newsreel stops being newsreel – a plotless succession of pictures, like in a *Sovkino-Journal*, and turns into a narrative, into a film lecture, where every sequence proves something; it turns into a harmonious whole, with a beginning, and intensification of the action, and a denouement.³⁷¹

Other reviewers of *Stride*, such as Ismail Urazov and Mikhail Bleiman, took the exact opposite position and claimed that the film's greatest achievement was its ability to be interesting despite its lack of plot.

The most consistent argument that emerges as to why Vertov's films should not be considered *khronika* concerned the disconnect on display in his films between shots and individual events. As we have seen, the alignment of the two had been the governing assumption for more than 25 years of non-fiction film. As is often the case, the drive to define *khronika* when a transgression is felt to have occurred, when certain unwritten laws and presumptions are suddenly absent.

To his critics, Vertov's transgression amounted to nothing less than "depriving newsreel of its soul." These were the words of the theorist and cultural critic Viktor Shklovsky. In a review titled "Where is Dziga Vertov striding?" Shklovsky identified two types of footage in *Stride, Soviet!*. On the one hand, material that is of world importance, containing informational and historical value. On the other, more quotidian footage (e.g.

³⁷¹ Osipov, G "Шарай, Совет!" in *Lines of Resistance*, 163.

streets being cleaned). Shklovsky used the distinction to argue that:

Khronika needs a signature, a date.

There is a difference between an idle factory in general and a specific reference to the Trekhgorny manufacturing workshops standing idle on 5 August, 1919. Mussolini talking interests me. But just a fat bald man talking – let him talk off-screen. The whole meaning of newsreel lies in the date, the time, and the place. Dziga Vertov cuts up newsreel.³⁷²

Shklovsky's point with regards to the specific examples is quite simple: label the shots with the requisite information to make them more accessible and meaningful. But what may have been good advice for a particular shot becomes problematic when made into a mandate for newsreel filmmaking in toto. Reading Shklovsky's review as an instruction on how to film *khronika*, imposes an informational perspective, searching for material that is historically predetermined and independent of the film.

Lev Kuleshov polemicised with Vertov around the same time on similar grounds. Since Kuleshov was one of the first to use montage to reduce narrative down to its bare elements, his take on newsreel is somewhat unexpected. In *khronika*, he argued, the need to be accurate with respect to informational content dictated the film's form:

The non-played film must not demonstrate the subjective impression of the artist on events however correct his artistic convictions may be. The newsreel must accurately demonstrate events and the form of montage of the newsreel is defined not by the author but by the raw material.³⁷³

Reviews such as Kuleshov's and Shklovsky's were more than critiques of Vertov's excesses. They were the first attempts to redefine newsreel as an informational medium. Some of the definitions of *khronika* that built on these critiques were totally at odds with the sequencing of film altogether and rejected any notion of meaning generated by filmic means.

Osip Brik was one of several critics who was unequivocal in his desire to see

³⁷² Shklovsky, Viktor "Куда шагает Дзига Вертов?" in *Lines of Resistance*, 170.

³⁷³ Kuleshov, Lev *Collected Works in 3 Volumes* (Moscow, 1987 Vol.1), 117.

khronika be strictly defined:

Khronika should be understood in the strict, literal sense, just as it is understood by a newspaper. The newsreel fact is always dated; it always has a specific name, place, and time; and it is an individual, unrepeatable document. Everything that can be filmed outside of this documentary fact will be a genre picture, and has a completely different cognitive value.³⁷⁴

The article is not atypical for the time. Debates about meaning in *khronika* were rampant for the next five years. Shklovsky went so far as to claim that a documentary image used for symbolic purposes actually became fictional. Writing about a sequence in *A Sixth Part of The World* made-up entirely of Western newsreel, re-edited to make an ideological point, Shklovsky insisted that "the factual nature of the shot disappeared; scripted shots appeared...the shots of the bourgeoisie being corrupted and dancing the foxtrot have a purely fictional character."³⁷⁵

Shklovsky's and Brik's concern for the factual precision of newsreel borrowed its language from the emerging literary movement known as *factography*. The movement began following calls for a "literature of fact" by critics associated with the *Lef* and *New Lef* journals, Brik and Shklovsky among them. The kinship of factography and *khronika* is not hard to recognize. "Literature of fact" according to Nikolai Chuzhak, one of the main theorists of Soviet factography, included the following types of writing:

the sketch [очерк] and the scientific monograph; the newspaper and factomontage; magazine and newspaper feuilleton...; biography (a work about a concrete individual); memoirs; autobiographies and human documents; essays; diaries; transcripts of judicial proceedings, as well as the debates surrounding the trial; travelogues and historical excursions; minutes from meetings and demonstrations, where the interests of different social groups, classes, and individuals intersect....³⁷⁶

³⁷⁴ Brik, Osip "Против жанровых картинок" in *Lines of Resistance*, 276.

³⁷⁵ Tsivian, ed. *Lines of Resistance*, 269.

³⁷⁶ Chuzhak, Nikolai ed. *Литература факта* (Moscow: Zakharov Press, 2000), 61. [my translation].

Looking at Chuzhak's list above, the overlap in the subject matter covered by "literature of fact" and *khronika* is immediately apparent. Genres such as the travelogue, embraced by factographers, had long been staples of non-fiction film. Protocol-like reports from trials and public demonstrations were prominent in early non-fiction as well and continued to be so in *Goskino-Calendar* and *Kino-Pravda*. The influence was mutual. Genres such as the *ocherk* would be used to subtitle some of the earliest feature-length documentaries produced in the Soviet Union, such as A. Litvinov *People of the Forest* or Viktor Turin's *Turksib*.

In addition to the overlap in genre and subject matter, *khronika* and factography faced similar formal and organizational challenges. Like newsreel makers, factographers sought to re-imagine plot and narrative without relying on the biography of an individual. What was needed, in Sergei Tretiakov's words, was a new mental and physical axis around which a world is created.³⁷⁷ While factographers welcomed the natural plots that occurred in certain memoirs, they recognized that most factual material either lacked or did not make evident its *sujet* or plot. Reflecting on this predicament, Chuzhak writes:

What can replace natural *sujet*-ness when plot points are either absent or scarce? Or else, how to uncover plot in places where the untrained eye does not detect it? This, my friends, will be the art of vision and the art of transmission. The art of seeing the plot points hidden from the unarmed eye is the art of promoting facts; the art of communicating such a plot, will be the art of promoting facts, for short we can call it "the literature of fact."³⁷⁸

The mention of the untrained eye evokes many of Vertov's statements about the mechanical eye's superiority over the human eye due to the former's endless perfectability. Equally pronounced in Chuzhak is the emphasis on transmission and direct address. Chuzhak's essay is meant to be prescriptive and as such it promotes a visual and,

³⁷⁷ Tretiakov, Sergei "Биография вещи" in *Литература факта*, 68.

³⁷⁸ Tretiakov, "Биография вещи," 58.

specifically, photographic understanding of "literary fact." Paradoxically, this move to make writing more visual would make *khronika* more verbal.

In 1922, while Alexei Gan was drafting *Constructivism*, Osip Brik published another benchmark of Constructivist thought, the production art manifesto "Into Production!" In it, Brik insisted that Soviet art shouldn't reflect reality but embody it:

everyone understands that it is not the idea, but the real object that is the goal of all authentic creation; everyone who can create something concrete should take part in the construction of these authentically proletarian centers of artistic culture. Reality, not an apparition: this is the slogan of the future art of the commune.³⁷⁹

Brik had spent the five years leading up to "Into Production!" battling against art whose only purpose was to reflect reality. As we've already seen in *Kino-Fot*, the production art platform helped *khronika* shed its indexical allegiance to the specific historical referent.

Recall Gan's observation that in *Kino-Pravda*:

Khronika ceases to be illustrative material reflecting this or that place in our many-faceted contemporary life, and becomes contemporary life as such, outside of territories, time, and individual significance.³⁸⁰

Spurred on by the encouraging press, *Kino-Pravda* shifted from the mechanical objectivity of historical records to a modernist objectivity grounded in the *interval*. So far, so good—*khronika* followed the production art paradigm. A competing impulse appears, however, when one observes that production art and Constructivism also spawned during this time a parallel drive towards greater mechanical precision and an intensified embrace of the index.

In literature, *factography* rejected excessively literary style. The analogous concerns in *khronika* were directed at the task of editing. The photograph rather than the

³⁷⁹ Brik, Osip, "Drenazh iskusstvu," *Iskusstvo kommuny*, no. 1 (1918) cited in Fore "The Operative Word in Soviet Factography" in *October* vol. 118 (2006), 99.

³⁸⁰ Gan, Aleksei, "10я Кино-Правда," 4.

film shot became factography's favored example of what a fact was. Filmmakers could not abandon editing altogether. Constructivist photographers such as Rodchenko, on the other hand, could easily switch to single-frame photography. And this is what happened in the several years prior to the *factography* movement. At this time Rodchenko abandoned collage and photo-montage experiments, such as the ones previously seen in *Kino-Fot*.³⁸¹

According to Benjamin Buchloh, the shift in Rodchenko's art practice—followed thereafter by many of his fellow Constructivists—had the effect of promoting the index:

...to abandon photo-montage altogether and to engage in single-frame still photography, which transforms montage through the explicit choice of camera angle, the framing of vision, the determinants of the filmic apparatus, and the camera's superiority over the conventions of human perception. With its emphasis on the material congruence of the sign with its signifying practice, on the causal relationship between the sign and its referent, and its focus on the indexical status of the sign, Rodchenko's work has defied a secondary level of meaning/reading.³⁸²

Rodchenko's search for "material congruence of the sign with its signifying practice" attempted to make the Constructivist object akin to a *natural*, as opposed to, a *conventional* sign.

Reflecting on the above, we notice two competing conceptions of indexicality emerge out of Constructivism. Both were applied to *khronika*, pushing it in different directions. In Gan's version of Constructivism, *Kino-Pravda*'s innovations made newsreel embody Soviet reality and become "contemporary life as such." What this meant in relation to Peirce's semiotic was lessening the role of the index in favor of other modalities. In Gan's words, *khronika* shifted from being an indexical sign of "this or that place."

³⁸¹ Buchloh, "From Faktura to Factography," 89.

³⁸² Buchloh, "From Faktura to Factography," 103.

At the same time, Constructivism reaffirmed the bond between sign and referent. Factography embraced this aspect of Constructivist thinking. And while the development of Soviet *khronika* was closely affiliated with the emerging literature of fact in its subject matter, it had a more difficult time with a strictly indexical understanding of "fact." Those familiar with Vertov's writings may find that such a conclusion jars with the frequency with which he trumpets the camera's ability to *fixate* and *affix* facts. Moreover, as we've seen, much of the institutional support that *khronika* received was inseparable from the camera's ability to produce visual protocols.

Language is a system based on the word's symbolic relation with its referent. When the factographers adopted a photographic notion of "literary fact" they did so to mitigate authorial excesses and flourishes, which were believed to increase the generality of a linguistic signs and symbolism in general. Though the factographers themselves did not use Peircean language: Chuzhak, Brik, and Tretiakov think about signification in similar terms and explicitly mention generality, abstraction, and nominalism as results that writers should avoid.³⁸³ Thus, one can argue, as Buchloh does above, that factographic urge to diminish authorial intervention sought to enhance and bolster the index.

Recall that for Peirce all three modalities—icon, index, symbol—are generally present in any sign. So, when Buchloh speaks of Constructivism reifying the index, he means that the indexical becomes more dominant. As a symbolic system, language can only go so far in the direction of the index. Ontological limits ensure that literary facts could not be made entirely indexical. Put another way, the factographer's privileging of the discrete and individual over the general and the abstract was well-suited for literature

³⁸³ Tretiakov, "Биография вещи," 42.

because of the author's immutable position as an intermediary between the world and the word. The word can be made more or less indexical only to a point. The author could not be eradicated altogether.

The incentive to emphasize indexicality and the discreteness of phenomena is more problematic for photographic media because unmediated transcription is the only thing that such media do automatically. Indexical transcription is the cornerstone from which such media must move forward. The index starts out dominant in any photographic image because, as Peirce tells us, the picture is “really and in its individual existence connected with the individual object.”³⁸⁴ Because all photographic media begins with the index, *khronika* develops by transcending the templates of early non-fiction, expanding beyond the index, and striking a balance between an indexical record and nominal abstraction.

While *khronika* shared many goals with *factography*, it was at odds with the movement's directive to limit intervention. While opening up a new stylistic path for literature, the factographic imperative to limit intervention curtailed documentary's development and promoted a mechanical objectivity already in place, a type of objectivity that exemplified early film culture and was at odds with *khronika's* development in the previous years.

These competing Constructivist strains shed light on Vertov's affiliation with the movement. His films as well as the backlash against them, both have their roots in Constructivist thinking. The new visual vocabulary in *Kino-Pravda* was embraced by Aleksei Gan who saw the films as an embodiment of reality, and exhibiting a kind of organicism that Gan sought by adding *tectonics* to the Constructivist program. *Tectonics*

³⁸⁴ Peirce, “Prolegomena,” in *Essential Peirce* vol.1, 251.

was a bulwark against pure aestheticism, of which Gan accused his fellow Constructivists, and stressed the organic connection between form and social meaning. As Maria Gough puts it, *tectonics* “guarantees the mutual imbrication of Constructivism and communism.”³⁸⁵ At the same time, as we've seen above, factography's urge to produce facts with minimal intervention, also put limits on *khronika's* ability to embody contemporary life as Gan and Vertov imagined.

The contradictory Constructivist influence, has led to some competing critical views about the relationship between *factography* and documentary. One of the most influential and thought-provoking accounts of factography's influence on Soviet documentary appears in Mikhail Yampolsky's essay "Reality at Second Hand."³⁸⁶ Yampolsky argues that the backlash against *Stride, Soviet!* and *A Sixth Part of the World* represented a shift to thematically organized montage, "a principled turn to 'second-hand' material," and a transition to working for the sake of the archive.³⁸⁷ For Yampolsky, the disfavor that meets Vertov's approach to *khronika* exemplifies a particular view of cultural evolution advocated by LEF/OPOYAZ critics, Shklovsky among them. In this model of cultural evolution, "periods of the dominance of raw material alternate with periods of the dominance of the construction."³⁸⁸ The shift towards the raw material culminates, according to Yampolsky, in the release and near universal acclaim for Esfir Shub's film *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* (1927). Made entirely from archival footage, the film's "long sequence" thematic montage exemplified the use of raw material as a model for artistic production.

³⁸⁵ Gough, *The Artist as Producer*, 73.

³⁸⁶ Yampolsky, Mikhail "Reality at Second Hand" in *Historical Journal of Film, Radio & Television* Vol. 11, Issue 2 (June, 1991),161-178.

³⁸⁷ Yampolsky, "Reality at Second Hand," 170.

³⁸⁸ Yampolsky, "Reality at Second Hand," 162.

The raw material vs. construction binary correctly identifies the two polarizing urges at work in shaping *khronika*. Yet what happens to the medium around 1927 is not fully circumscribed by the opposition between Vertov and Shub. Beyond the two filmmakers, the concept of *khronika* begins to be discussed more than ever before. And much of the writing about *khronika*—rather than about Vertov and Shub individually—reveals resistance to the construction vs. raw material binary advocated by Formalist critics.

It is incontrovertible that the accolades bestowed on Shub's film coincide with an upsurge of criticism against Vertov's work. While there was significant criticism of Vertov's handling of non-fiction material, the institutional backlash Vertov faced had to do with profligacy. Initially budgeted at 50,000 rubles, *A Sixth Part of The World* ended up costing 130,000 and led to repeated accusations of financial irresponsibility. The cost of *Sixth Part* precipitated Vertov's fallout with Sovkino head Ilya Trainin, and eventually led to Vertov's dismissal, made final after Vertov refused to provide Trainin an advanced script for *Man With the Movie Camera*.³⁸⁹ Unlike Vertov, Shub worked solo, shot no original material for *Romanov Dynasty*, and was thus a model of fiscal responsibility amongst the *khronika* makers.

Yampolsky argues that Shub's emphasis on thematic montage exemplified the shift towards raw material, away from the construction of Vertov's work and was thus embraced. However, the opposition of the two montage styles does little to explain the more radical attempts to purify newsreel as visual information, exemplified by Brik's commandment that "newsreel should be understood in the strict, literal sense, just as it is

³⁸⁹ Mackay, John *Dziga Vertov: His Life and Work* (unpublished manuscript), 23-24.

understood by a newspaper."

The differences in montage style between Shub and Vertov have been overstated. Discussions of theme-based montage pre-date Shub's film and first appear between 1924-26 to describe Vertov's first forays into the feature-length format. Claims that Vertov's work ceased to be *khronika* were supported with references to the thematic organization of the material. The clearest formulation of this idea occurs Vitali Zhemchuzhni's review of *A Sixth Part of the World*. Zhemchuzhni's general point made is much the same – the individual event loses significance in Vertov's film – the review makes clear that this occurs not because of the excessively subjective or artistic montage, as Shklovsky and Kuleshov would have it, but because of its thematic organization. Zhemchuzhni begins with a pre-existing definition of *khronika* and goes on to explain why that definition is not applicable to Vertov's film:

Every shot is a piece of reality, transferred to film by the lens.

Despite this, *A Sixth Part of the World* cannot be called newsreel. It is true that in both cases real events are filmed. But in newsreel the events are always individualized. Mention of the place and time, stress of characteristic details are compulsory.

In *A Sixth Part of the World* the showing of an individual event is subordinated to the thematic intention of the entire film. They select from every filmed fact only what lies in the plane of this intention. Events are linked not as they follow each other chronologically (as in *khronika*), or through territorial closeness (as in a "scenic" film"), they are connected by thematic features. So the shots of the Krupp factories, the foxtrot, a Fascist parade, a Negro musical number, colonial peoples, are united into the thematic complex of "Capitalism."

It is clear that when you construct a film in this way the factual material is to some degree generalized; it loses its concrete (documentary) character. The ordinary does not even recognize that after the intertitle "Fascists" he is shown Mussolini "himself", or that among the Chinese troops he sees Marshal Feng Yeu-Xiang.

That is not information but an editorial.³⁹⁰

Zhemchuzhni starts with a broad definition of newsreel: "every shot is a piece of reality."

But in explaining why *A Sixth Part of the World* cannot be considered *khronika*, he

³⁹⁰ Zhemchuzhni, "Шестая часть мира" in *Lines of Resistance*, 198.

reverts to an informational definition. What violates the informational capacity of these shots and makes it into an editorial is the thematic organization of visual material: "events are linked not as they follow each other chronologically (as in *khronika*), or through territorial closeness (as in a 'scenic' film), they are connected by thematic features." The author cautions the kinoks that their approach leads to a kind of "cinematic phrase-making," to the loss of respect for the film fact, the film document.

It is tempting to dismiss such a review as aesthetically retrograde. But Zhemchuzhni does not cast judgment on the film but rather stresses that the film's merits highlight conceptual obstacle inherent in understanding *khronika* as the mere preservation of historical moments. His conclusion is that "the problem of *khronika* is not eradicated by *A Sixth Part*, but posed with a new sharpness."³⁹¹

What is the "problem" that Zhemchuzhni writes of? My suggestion throughout has been that it is the problem of grappling with the meaning of motion pictures as units of information. Vertov's film, according to Zhemchuzhni, was not information but an editorial. This distinction had been lurking in Soviet thinking about non-fiction all along. In 1919, one of the first books of film theory in Soviet Union, the anthology *Cinematography*, contained the essay "Social Battle for the Screen," which focused on *khronika*. The author Platon Kerzhenzev, a journalist and future Narkompros worker, rebelled against passionless newsreel protocols and promoted an essayistic, analytical approach to non-fiction images. In the margins of his copy, Vertov made a note:

*Kerzhenzev is a kinok.*³⁹²

³⁹¹ Zhemchuzhni, "Шестая часть мира" in *Lines of Resistance*, 198.

³⁹² Vertova-Svilova ed., *Вертов в воспоминаниях*, 96.

While the distinction between fact and information may have been there all along, it remained largely theoretical until the organizational strategies used in *khronika* forced the question of what was and was not visual information. Far from being a bulwark against Vertovian montage, thematic organization was recognized as a necessary strategy for producing longer films. In his review of *A Sixth Part of the World* the godfather of Soviet newsreel, Grigori Boltianski, states that thematic organization addressed the central problem of all feature-length *khronika*:

The newsreel material which Vertov uses in *A Sixth Part of the World* is difficult to shape into a plot, to cement into a single whole, and Vertov takes the only possible path here – he presents the material on the basis of a chosen theme and an idea which is pursued throughout the material, realized by means of intertitles and the montage of pieces which are not connected by the plot.³⁹³

For both factography and newsreel, thematic organization was seen as the only possible solution for working with plotless material.

Zhemchuzhni's and Boltianski's reviews make clear the limitations inherent in seeing the transition from Vertov to Shub as simply a shifting artistic paradigm or as documentary's Formalist reversion towards a period of raw material. While the accusations of excessive flourish and artistic montage, no doubt, curtailed practice, documentaries generally followed the thematic organization that Vertov first developed in *Kino-Pravda*.

My suggestion then is that the opposition between Vertov's films and Shub's *Romanov Dynasty* must be understood in concert with the move to purify and define *khronika* as a medium of visual information. The extensive debates about what is and isn't *khronika* are triggered primarily by Vertov's films but they don't represent a paradigm shift. Instead, they speak to the practical need to differentiate newsreel from a

³⁹³ Boltianski, "Шестая часть мира" in *Lines of Resistance*, 197.

more analytic approach to film documents. *Romanov Dynasty* became a flagship for these debates not due to its editing but because it was a film that consciously questioned meaning conveyed by historical footage.

Shub's film examines history in a way that Vertov's films, and even her later films, would not. Often considered the first *found-footage* film (*film de montage*), Shub's film continued a long line of historical compilation films but brought to the genre a distinctly analytical titling style. Made up exclusively of pre-Revolutionary newsreel, the film was a return to the visual aesthetics of early non-fiction cinema. The marketing campaign for the film likewise played up the aesthetic of actualities. To get a sense of this, one need only to compare the posters for *A Sixth Part of the World* with those used to advertise *Romanov Dynasty*, which appear quaint and nostalgic by comparison.



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³⁹⁴ Author's private collection.



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Like the publicity material for actuality films that provided only a list of the film's scenes and main attractions, the poster for Shub's film selects four actualities and captions them in newsreel fashion.

Along with the film's visual aesthetic, its organization also hearkens back to earlier times. It begins with a portrait gallery of government officials in the Kremlin. Many of the initial titles are only a single word long and identify the main participants. After this, there are several shots of the landed estates, showing their owners and the peasants working the land. As in *Kino-Pravda*, the strategy is to first make the viewer see naively and then prompt interpretation to emerge organically out of the initial opposition between the nobility and the peasantry.

Shub was most celebrated for her skillful juxtapositions and her ironic titles, which never become didactic. In one early scene, she crosscuts between perspiring military commanders leisurely dancing the mazurka on a sea cruise and images of peasants sweating while digging ditches.

³⁹⁵ Author's private collection.



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Shub's skill is in the use of ironic themes, such as perspiration, to connect scenes to a pre-existing discourse about class relations in pre-Revolutionary Russia.

It is true that in her cutting, Shub was more cognizant of the continuity system of editing, a product of her spending several years re-editing Western fiction films for the Soviet market. Notwithstanding the greater accessibility of her montage style, it should be said that her later films such as *The Great Path* (1928) and *Today* (1930) are distinct from *Romanov Dynasty* and are more Vertovian in their cutting. By the early 1930s Vertov and Shub would both be grouped together under a negative light, compared to the "optimistic illustrations" of Soviet life created by Yan Poselski and Mikhail Sluzkoj.³⁹⁷

I've identified some similarities between Vertov and Shub to show that the stylistic gap that separates them as filmmakers is not as large as has often been suggested. In her memoirs, Shub openly admits to being Vertov's student and describes spending a great deal of time with him between 1923-1926. In her words, Vertov was "an innovator, an inventor, a seeker of new paths and means of expressions for *khronika*."³⁹⁸ Her personal relationship with Vertov was strained largely because of her marriage to Aleksei

³⁹⁶ *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* framegrab. DVD: Flicker Alley, 2011.

³⁹⁷ For more on this see Liudmila July's *Документальный иллюзион*, 33.

³⁹⁸ Shub, *Жизнь моя – кинематограф*, 36.

Gan with whom Vertov had a public falling out in 1925. Shub main criticism of Vertov was that he went "too far in his belief that any meaning can be created through montage."³⁹⁹

What made *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* stand apart from Vertov's work, I would argue, was its clear separation of newsreel as record from the film's interpretive voice. The split is evident in film's subtitle, "a montage of historical documents," which stresses the integrity of the footage as evidence. Shub's resistance to explaining large ideas in the intertitles likewise upheld the separation between document and interpretation. There is a consistent literary voice that runs through the intertitles, a voice not integrated with the visual content. The alternating episodes are always handled with pathos or with irony.

With its pre-Revolutionary material and its preservation of the early film aesthetics, *The Fall of The Romanov Dynasty* was a film that clearly delineated the line between *khronika* and its interpretation. The same could not be said of Vertov. In fact, the opposite had been true. As we had seen, Vertov's first three features frequently elicited the response that they were "not *khronika*." These films were scolded and embraced because they brought into focus the need for a more precise definition of *khronika*.

In his writings and public speeches, Vertov promoted a broad definition of *khronika*. He held on to the term and used it to describe feature-length films longer than most. By 1931, the term *documentary* (along with several other alternatives) was commonly used to describe feature-length non-fiction filmmaking, while the meaning of *khronika* was understood primarily as visual informational. Even then, when asked to

³⁹⁹ Shub, *Жизнь моя – кинематограф*, 87. Russian: "Ошибочно было утверждение, что одним монтажом можно привести фильм к любому содержанию."

explain the difference between *khronika*, *Kino-Eye* films, documentary, and non-fiction film, Vertov responded:

There is no difference between them. These are just different labels for one and the same branch of film production. When called *khronika* it points to its connection to the persistent accumulation and collection of material. When called *Kino-Eye*, it points to the fixation of *khronika* with an armed eye (movie camera, *Kino-Eye*). The term *documentary* points to the authenticity and reality of the material collected. And, finally, *non-fiction* indicates that such filmmaking does not rely on actors or pretense.⁴⁰⁰

While holding on to *khronika*, Vertov recognized that his practice was increasingly at odds with the word's common meaning. Consequently, he made multiple caveats and introduced new classifications in order to address the incongruence between longer more complex films and more conventional newsreel journals. His earliest attempt to do so dates back to *Kino-Eye*'s release when he identified three distinct types of newsreel practice.

The first type was "ongoing *khronika*" ("текущая хроника")—the kind practiced by newsreel journals such *Goskino-Calendar* and *Sovkino-Journal*. Even though the material was released in journal form, Vertov saw this type of newsreel as providing the informational building blocks for larger historical overviews.⁴⁰¹ The second type of *khronika* was "monthly *khronika*." *Kino-Pravda* was an example of such *khronika* because it exhibited greater analytical prowess than the traditional newsreel journal. The third type, seen in the film *Kino-Eye*, was *khronika* of the everyday, what the 1924 Soviet photography exhibition referred to as "social *khronika*."

Vertov's expansive definition of *khronika* was difficult to reconcile with the discussions of *khronika* as a form of visual information, which begin around 1925 and

⁴⁰⁰ Vertov, *Статьи и выступления*, 215.

⁴⁰¹ Taylor, *Politics of Soviet Cinema*, 71.

continue well into the sound era. With Vertov no longer the only game in town and newsreel journals produced across the Soviet Union in greater numbers, writing about *khronika* in the press turned to the question of information dissemination and the logistics of production. Questions of film form—the ones posed by Vertov's films—no longer featured prominently in the debates the way they had in 1922-1923. As the critic Nikolai Baklin put it in a 1925 article about *khronika*: "Artistic concerns are secondary to the practical obstructionism in filming events and demonstrations."⁴⁰² *Khronika* had once again become something of an abstract pursuit with the fact of capturing footage eclipsing concern for its look and substance.

Writing in *ARK*, the journal of the Association of Revolutionary Cinematography, Baklin expressed frustration at the poor quality equipment and inadequate distribution of *khronika* across the Soviet Union. Though the author mentions newsreel's historical usefulness for future generation, there is little evidence of an artistic paradigm shift towards raw material as an aesthetic principle. In fact the rawness of the material was for Baklin and for several other critics, a problem to be overcome, one born of increased production and diminishing aesthetic qualities.

In 1925, *Sovkino-Journal* had replaced both *Kino-Pravda* and *Goskino-Calendar*. With its sound financial base, and legal monopoly on distribution, Sovkino received exactly what Gan, Vertov, and other *khronika* supporters were asking for in 1922. Released regularly and shown before every feature in commercial theaters across the Soviet Union, *Sovkino-Journal* fulfilled the government's commitment to keeping a consistent visual record.⁴⁰³

⁴⁰² Baklin, Nikolai "О Кино хронике" in *ARK* #3 (Moscow, 1925), 3.

⁴⁰³ Roshal, Дзига Вертов, 125.

Despite the improved production conditions and regular output, Soviet *kronika* continued to be criticized. Writing in 1926, Aleksei Gan placed the blame for newsreel's decline squarely at the foot of Sovkino:

Before the appearance of Sovkino, *khronika* was evolving its own path and was establishing itself as an independent kind of cinema. This gave it the chance to develop formally as well as in its ideas, and created a cadre of resilient and professional workers.

Once it was a noticeable phenomenon in Soviet cinematography, *khronika* became an almost mandatory part of every production company, which encouraged its development and created competition. But the transition to Sovkino has caused *khronika* to wilt and weaken and gradually fall from the ranks of film-production.⁴⁰⁴

The guaranteed support that *khronika* enjoyed from Sovkino stifled its organic development as a viable alternative to the fiction film. Though Gan avoids mentioning Vertov by name—the two fell out after Vertov's critique of staging in Gan's film *The Island of the Pioneers*—it is difficult to read Gan's critique of *Sovkino-Journal* as anything other than a validation of the *kinoks'* push to move the newsreel journal past its Pathé origins.

Gan was not alone in his negative assessment of *Sovkino-Journal*. Later that same year, Khrisanf Khersonski observed that despite increased interest in *khronika*, the newsreels themselves had reverted to a primitive state, and differed little from Khanzhankov's *Pegasus* journal.⁴⁰⁵ A month later, another editorial, this one by A. Urechin in *Soviet Screen*, described the newsreel shown in theaters as atavistic and lacking all cinematographic technique. Reality need not be understood be in such a narrowly informational manner narrowly fashion:

The content of *khronika* is transmitted through the image, because the cinema addresses the eye. But facts in real life are not only visible, they speak to other

⁴⁰⁴ Gan, Aleksei, "Организация жизни," 4.

⁴⁰⁵ *Pravda* June 8th, 1926, 3.

senses as well. The initiative to orient ourselves to these other factors must belong to us. In real life, facts are not only seen but address all our sense. *Khronika*, which only registers the visible component, inevitably cheapens the fact.⁴⁰⁶

Like Shklovsky's review of *A Sixth Part of the World*, Urechin's is a factographic take on *khronika*. His general point—that facts were impoverished by their presentation in *khronika*—is not much different than the accusations that Shklovsky hurled at Vertov. But Urechin is not writing about *A Sixth Part of the World* but about *Sovkino-Journal*, the newsreel journal that functioned exactly as Shklovsky had expected.

The fact that Urechin and Shklovsky would appear to push newsreel in different directions is not just the difference of opinion within a single group. It reveals that factography pushed *khronika* in two different directions. In the critical literature on the period, factography's has been understood either as facilitating Vertov's work, as in Elizabeth Papazian's book, or as debilitating it, as in Yampolsky's aforementioned article. Both scholars are correct in their own ways. The discrepancy between them points to the opposing impulses seen in the above reviews.

Factography contradictory relationship with Vertov's films is evident in the advice that Urechin gives *Sovkino-Journal* for moving forward: "the camera must be activated, it must be endowed with interest in the thing itself."⁴⁰⁷ The statement could double as an apt description of *kino-eye*'s role in the *Kino-Pravda* journal and echoes many of Vertov's own written statements. The obvious similarity makes it all the more strange that neither his name nor his work is mentioned in the article. One would be tempted to dismiss this incident as an author's personal aversion to Vertov, a common phenomenon of the period, but then many articles about *khronika* published between 1925-1928, do not mention

⁴⁰⁶ Urechin, A "Принудительный Ассортимент" in *Soviet Screen* (Moscow: 1927), 6.

⁴⁰⁷ Urechin, "Принудительный Ассортимент," 6.

Kino-Pravda, Vertov, or the *kinoks*, even when referring to what can only be their past work. This is not a case of forgetfulness or willful omission. Vertov remained the most well known documentarian in the Soviet Union. His absence from discussions points to the fact that at this time newsreel comes to be disassociated from the work of an author, while Vertov's films were increasingly seen in authorial terms.

Above, I have shown the competing influences at work in defining *khronika* at this time. But the larger question still stands: why does an evolutionary and inclusive view of *khronika* fail to take hold? After all, this was the view promoted from 1922 onwards by Vertov, Gan and other prominent figures. It is a view that accommodates the formal innovation on display in *Kino-Pravda* and other longer *khronika* films. At the level of production, the standardization of *Sovkino-Journal* and its establishment as a pre-feature attraction played a part. But this alone does not preclude *khronika* from becoming an all-encompassing term such as *non-fiction* or *documentary*. Two other factors need to be brought into the picture. First is the emergence and promotion of the *kulturfilm* as a non-fiction genre around 1926. The second factor was the recognition, emerging between 1926-28 that Soviet *khronika* was falling behind Germany and the US in the production and dissemination of newsreel, losing what today would be referred to as the information war. I consider both of these factors in the next section.

xvi. The news from Germany and the dawn of the information era.

The term *kulturfilm* first comes to prominence in Germany during WWI. Understood to be a subsidiary of educational films (*Lehrfilm*), the term first appears in 1912 in the political campaigns of German labor movements.⁴⁰⁸ Much like the educational *lehrfilm*, *kulturfilm* was an elastic term, capable of encompassing most actuality footage. An early UFA catalog captures the term's breadth, when it describes the *kulturfilm* as "a mirror of the beautiful world."

With its breadth intact, the term occasionally appeared in early Russian film press prior to the Revolution. It was usually used to describe foreign product. While the *kulturfilm* was largely absent from film discourse between 1917-1925, it re-emerges around 1926 when it begins to be applied, albeit unsystematically at first, to many of the earliest Soviet expedition films. This narrowing of *kulturfilm*'s scope was, in large part, the work of critic and filmmaker, Vladimir Erofeev. Though not as well known as Vertov or Shub, Erofeev exerted a comparable influence on Soviet documentary.

Between 1927, when he made his debut with the compilation film *Beyond the Polar Circle*, and his death in 1940, Erofeev directed twenty documentaries, as well as writing two books and countless articles on all aspects of non-fiction film. During the first half of the 1920s, Erofeev was active in establishing the trade publication, *Kino-Gazeta* and the Association of Revolutionary Cinematography (ARK). In 1925, Erofeev traveled to Germany in order to examine the country's film industry and bring back knowledge that could be valuable in building up its Soviet counterpart. Less than a year later Erofeev published, along with a series of articles, a book titled *The German Film-Industry*.

⁴⁰⁸ Abel ed., *Encyclopedia of Early Film*, 527.

The German industry was better organized and commercially more successful than its Soviet counterpart. Along with admiring the organization of German production and distribution, Erofeev's trip also gave him the idea of becoming a *kulturfilm*-maker himself. Of the German *kulturfilms*, Erofeev was most impressed, and as a filmmaker most influenced, by the travelogue *kulturfilms* that documented exotic explorations. Much of Erofeev's interest in active filmmaking stemmed from his acquaintance and fondness for the filmmaker Colin Ross, a Flaherty-like filmmaker-adventurer.

Although Erofeev was dissatisfied with the breadth of the *kulturfilm*, he recognized that Russian lacked a good alternative:

The German name *kulturfilm* covers all films except for fictional entertainment. The concept is quite imprecise and provokes a bit of outrage – shouldn't fiction films be cultural as well? But given that the Russian language does not have an appropriately broad term, it is necessary that we use this not exactly appropriate word of unambiguously bourgeois origins.⁴⁰⁹

As a critic, Erofeev breathed new life into the German term by re-appropriating *kulturfilm* and using it to describe the expedition films that he admired most and himself would soon make. The years between 1926 and 1930 would witness a proliferation of such *kulturfilm* travelogues: *Towards the Shores of the Pacific (from Novosibirsk to Vladivostok)*; *Across Europe (a trip to Germany and Italy)*; *Around Europe (the movement of Soviet ships from Arkhangelsk to Odessa)*; *Around Asia (a race of the steamship Decembrist from Odessa to Japan and China)*; *The Gates of the Caucasus*.⁴¹⁰ Though not strict travelogues, Vertov's use of travel as an organizational device led to *Stride, Soviet!!!* and *A Sixth Part of The World* being frequently labeled *kulturfilms*. By 1927 the *kulturfilms* would expand beyond expedition films and encompass science films as well as most other forms of

⁴⁰⁹ Erofeev, Vladimir *The German Film Industry* (Кино-индустрия Германии) Moscow: Kinoizdat, 1926. p. 75

⁴¹⁰ Lebedev, *Очерки истории кино*, Accessed 08/12/12 at <http://bibliotekar.ru/kino/20.htm>

longer non-fiction.

The increase in the production of *kulturfilms* occurs alongside an increase in *khronika* production. Between 1924 and 1925, only 70 non-fiction films were produced; this number included all educational, scientific, and other *kulturfilms*. By 1930, the number climbed to over 200.⁴¹¹ In newsreel, the jump was similarly pronounced. In 1922, the fourteen issues of *Kino-Pravda* made up the entirety of Soviet newsreel production. By 1926, more than 120 issues were released. By 1930, that number topped 500.⁴¹²

As with the newsreel journals, the growing number of expedition films gave the term *kulturfilm* the stability it had previously lacked. This increase of both newsreel journals and longer non-fiction is one reason why *khronika* would not encompass both short and long forms as Vertov advocated. Equating *khronika* with the *Sovkino-Journal*, many of those writing about *khronika*, the *kulturfilm* was a convenient "other" that encompassed stray non-fiction felt to no longer qualify as *khronika*. We've already seen an example of this; Urechin ends his article above, which focused on newsreel journals exclusively, by pointing to the need to improve both *khronika* and the *kulturfilm*.

By 1927, the pairing of *khronika* and *kulturfilm* had become entrenched. Celebrating the 100th issue of *Sovkino-Journal*, an unsigned editorial in *Soviet Screen* gave Soviet non-fiction the following progress report:

⁴¹¹ Lebedev, *Очерки истории кино*, Accessed 08/12/12 at <http://bibliotekar.ru/kino/20.htm>

⁴¹² Lebedev, *Очерки истории кино*, Accessed 08/12/12 at <http://bibliotekar.ru/kino/20.htm>



We have written a great deal about the *kulturfilm*, about its significance and necessity. A lot has changed recently. The number of *kulturfilms* has grown, as has interest in them. A new theatre has opened in Moscow that shows only *kulturfilms*.

Along with fighting for scientific cinema cinema, there has also been a struggle for another type of non-fiction cinema – *khronika*.

Not too long ago *khronika* was released irregularly. From one occasion to the next. Too often, *khronika* was made-up of 'production scraps' – accidental shots filmed by fiction film crews during expeditions that didn't end up making the final cut.

Khronika was of low quality. Often the viewer, who had come to the cinema wearing summer clothes, would sit in the sweltering heat, and look at snow on the screen, pedestrians lifting their collars and slapping their hands together to stay warm. This was called – 'current events.'

It's self-evident that such *khronika* could not expect to be considered information.

But *khronika* could not have been otherwise. Not until it had won its rightful place in the theatres, until there was assurance that it would be shown and wouldn't linger on a shelf for six months.⁴¹³

I cite the above article at length for several reasons. More than any piece of writing I've come across, the article captures the instability that the term accrues during its first Soviet decade. Moreover, by splitting non-fiction film into two clearly defined categories—*khronika* and *kulturfilm*—the article heralds both the emergence of feature length documentary and the stabilization of *khronika* as a form of visual information. *Khronika* no longer dealt with "facts." Even though *factography* was at its peak at the end of

⁴¹³ Unsigned editorial in *Soviet Screen* (Moscow: November, 1927), 2.

1927—the year the article was published—the word "fact" is conspicuously absent. Instead of *fact*, the article refers to *khronika*'s goal as the distribution of "information" (информация). Before 1927, the word was rarely used in connection with film. In fact, as the author makes clear above, the lack of a standard format and the formal irregularity of *Kino-Pravda* made it impossible to consider that journal as information.

Though occasionally framed as a response to cinematic excesses such as Vertov's, the push to define *khronika* is indicative of a larger societal shift and represents a culture grappling with the idea of visual information as such. Between 1927-29, this grappling takes the form of an upsurge of articles focusing on production quantities, dissemination, and topicality of foreign newsreel. As Erofeev's comparison of analysis of the German film industry made clear, the Soviet film industry had a lot to learn from Western models, especially with regards to marketing non-fiction film and newsreel. The articles written around this time pick up this idea and stress that Sovkino did not capitalize on the interest that existed, at home and abroad, in non-fiction film. Unlike earlier articles that emphasized the need for distinctly Soviet *khronika*, after 1927 critics begin to suggest that Sovkino should imitate Western newsreel rather than set itself apart. Many critics argued that the failure to compete with Western newsreel would have significant geopolitical consequences.

Grigori Boltianski led this campaign for international competitiveness with "What lessons can we learn from foreign *khronika*" in a 1927 issue of *Soviet Screen*. This article, along with several others, paint a picture of an informational arms race in which the Soviet Union is clearly losing out. Emphasizing the international reach of French, American, and German newsreel companies, Boltianski pulls no punches: "these 8-10

companies own the world."⁴¹⁴ To make his point, Boltianski offers several anecdotes. In one, a foreign newsreel firm charters a private airplane to deliver valuable footage. In another, a heroic cinematographer makes a death-defying airdrop of footage on to the deck of a steamship at sea. These superhuman efforts, Boltianski stresses, were exerted to ensure the timely delivery of vital information.

Boltianski does not avoid aesthetics altogether but insists that Western *khronika* had made strides in that capacity as well. No longer is Western newsreel the monolithic and passive productions mocked by Vertov and Gan. On the contrary:

In America they reward creative interesting shooting that captures daily moments, comical nuance or otherwise unusual accents. Likewise, they value shooting "raids", or as our kinoks at home call it "life caught unawares."⁴¹⁵

Acknowledging the inventiveness of Western newsreel, Boltianski does not promote creativity over non-creative protocol shooting. Both are needed. Consistency and clear guidelines for newsreel shooting allowed Western firms to maintain their grip on the world, especially in places where professional cinematographers were not available:

For inexperienced cinematographers and correspondents, amateur filmmakers, [American] firms create comprehensive instructions: how and at what rhythm to film celebrations or funerals, how to maintain a characteristic atmosphere of a given event.⁴¹⁶

Although Boltianski pays lip service to aesthetic concerns, he is clear that in light of the information race underway the visual quality of newsreel is of secondary importance when compared with concerns over output. The overriding message of Boltianski's article is that newsreel's impact should extend beyond domestic concerns and become international: "Like the Americans, we must become a world giant in producing

⁴¹⁴ Boltianski, Grigori "Какие уроки нам дает заграничная хроника" in *Soviet Screen* (Moscow: September 1926), 3.

⁴¹⁵ Boltianski, "Какие уроки нам дает заграничная хроника," 3.

⁴¹⁶ Boltianski, "Какие уроки нам дает заграничная хроника," 3.

khronika. Not just Soviet *khronika*, proletarian *khronika*."⁴¹⁷

As newsreel begins to be understood in the context of ideological influence, the worry that Soviet *khronika* has remained hopelessly provincial only grows. In the 1928 article "Newsreel Across Borders!" L. Mogilevski focused on giving Soviet newsreel greater international resonance. Comparing Sovkino's newsreel journal with production at Germany's UFA and Emelka—the companies responsible for the journals *Wochenschau* and *Emelka-Woche*—Mogilevski claims that assumptions about newsreel's unprofitability had created an impasse at home that had kept information about the Soviet Union from reaching Germany. Nobody in Sovkino, Mogilevski writes, considered the distribution of Soviet material abroad as a priority.⁴¹⁸

While Mogilevski encouraged the exchange of information across borders, others saw the disparity in newsreel production in militaristic terms. Writing in 1928, Nikolai Spiridovski stressed that while Soviet newsreel was still getting over its "childhood illnesses," American newsreel was waging class warfare:

Splendidly organized, *khronika* in the United States is a powerful weapon in the class war waged by American bourgeoisie and capitalist classes. *Khronika* educates the spectator in the spirit of patriotism, distracting from all those events that could evoke any thoughts that are disadvantageous for the bourgeoisie.⁴¹⁹

Whereas American newsreel was an ideological weapon, its Soviet counterpart was not. The shortcoming was, once again, due to inadequate organization. Rather than splintering off into individual film productions, newsreel had to be organized in a top-down fashion

⁴¹⁷ Boltianski, "Какие уроки нам дает заграничная хроника," 3.

⁴¹⁸ Mogilevski, L "Хроника без границ" in *Soviet Screen* (Moscow: March 1928), 27.

⁴¹⁹ Spiridovski, N editorial in *Soviet Screen* (Moscow: March 1928) 3.

Прекрасно организованная кино хроника в Америке является могучим орудием классовой борьбы в руках американских капиталистов и буржуазии. Кино-хроника воспитывает зрителя в духе патриотизма, отвлекая его внимание от всех событий так или иначе могущих навести его на нежелательные для буржуазии мысли.

modeled on the newspaper. In Spiridovski's own words: "newspaper-like organization of *khronika* with the editor at the head."⁴²⁰

The reappearance of the newspaper as a model for *khronika* marks a return to Lenin's initial instructions to Lunacharsky regarding the foundation of newsreel. In the context of the informational war between Soviet Russia and the West, the return to a more naïve visual style was promoted as a way of enhancing newsreel's ideological force. The most interesting argument for aesthetically bland and decidedly un-agitational newsreel appeared in a 1929 essay by Konstantin Feldman. Feldman was a staunch supporter of Vertov and often defended his work against accusations of deforming facts. Given Feldman's embrace of Vertov's work, including *The Man with the Movie Camera*, his 1929 essay on *khronika* may seem perplexing at first. In it, Feldman appears to turn his back on all the accomplishments of Soviet *khronika*.

In his review of *The Man With the Movie Camera*, Feldman praised Vertov for transcending Aristotelian unities of place, time, and action. Yet, when writing about *khronika*, he insists formal matters are not only secondary but also a distraction. According to Feldman *khronika* should contain sensationalism, dry informational titles, and the newspaper-structure found in foreign journals. The newsreel editor's only real concern should be to make the speed of turnaround comparable with that of the newspaper. The goal of newsreel is "sensation"—to show visually what the newspapers are writing about and to do so the same day as them.

Arguing for greater similarity between the newsreel journal and the newspaper, Feldman also encourages a return to the neutral informational tone in the title cards. As we've seen, agitational, distinctly Soviet intertitles had been, since 1918, the bare

⁴²⁰Spiridovski, editorial, 3.

minimum used to distinguish Soviet *khronika* from its bourgeois predecessors. Feldman saw matters in a different light. For him, the passive annotation of Western journals was a deliberate strategy that maximized the power of visual information:

Like any informational leaflet, the Western newsreel journal attempts to underscore the absence of any political agenda. It has developed a specific style of explanatory intertitles – a dry, protocol-like description of events that hides the author's attitude towards the event. However, this apolitical stance is a show. The newspaper agitates through the facts. And it is through the selection of visual facts and in their presentation that the class essence of foreign newsreel becomes apparent.⁴²¹

Feldman's argument is that the power of visual information resides is not in what the camera interprets but in what it omits. Thus, in foreign *khronika* we rarely see "class warfare, strikes, demonstrations, or groups of unemployed people."⁴²²

The problem with Soviet newsreel, according to Feldman, is that rather than focusing on politically significant events, *Sovkino-Journal* attempts to be visually comprehensive, showing all walks of Soviet life and too often indulging in "scenic pictures." Feldman estimates that "purely informational material" occupies only twenty percent of the journal. When it does offer informational content, Feldman claims that Soviet newsreel diminishes the agitational power of the material by organizing the issues thematically (e.g. battling illiteracy) and making the political position explicit. One should not dismiss such reasoning as simply Feldman's idiosyncrasy. For Feldman, currency and topicality trump organization and interpretation. The opposition of information and organization points to a deeper conceptual split that occurs in the thinking about documentary motion pictures.

The story of *khronika* in the Soviet Union was parabolic. The templates and

⁴²¹ Feldman, Konstantin, editorial in *Soviet Screen* (Moscow: March 1927), 3.

⁴²²Feldman, editorial, 3.

aesthetic defaults that ossified over the course of cinema's first 25 years were, from 1918-1925, drastically reconceived and expanded. The format, running time, visual style, editing, and organizational defaults of non-fiction film changed while remaining under the rubric of *khronika*. The pace at which the medium developed created a backlash against certain experiments.

By 1927, *khronika*'s real *other* was no longer the fiction film but the *kulturfilm*. The first in a series of labels for long-form non-fiction, leading up to the canonization of the *documentary*, the *kulturfilm* emerged as *khronika*'s satellite. Together with Sovkino's standardizing newsreel production and distribution, the splitting of non-fiction paved the way for newsreel to undergo another purification and to codify the notion of visual information independent of its sequencing. *Khronika*'s first attempt at such purification was—aided by Gan's theory of *tectonics* and Vertov's *interval*—was an attempt to abstract from the precise historical record for the sake of a phenomenological constant, one that preceded informational significance. The second gesture of purification responded to a different strain within Constructivism and zeroed in on documentary's indexical fidelity and its responsibility to the historical event as a basic unit of meaning.

In light of these two tendencies, Feldman's praise of Vertov's *The Man With The Movie Camera* and his embrace of passive informational *khronika* no longer seem contradictory. Both positions represent an impulse to purify, a gesture that united the pursuits of the Russian avant-garde across different media. Stravinsky's claim that music expressed "nothing but itself", Malevich's search for a pure language of painting, Khlebnikov's creating poetry from of non-sensical phonemes and morphemes – all of these innovations responded to a similar purifying impulse and sought to discover a

medium's specificity.

Khronika underwent two periods of purification. As a medium, it can be said to contain two specificities. The purely visual and the purely informational views of *khronika* stake out the entire domain of film meaning as such. At one end, meaning is understood as the sequencing of vision over time, detached from spatio-temporal reality and structured by the film's duration. At the other end of the spectrum, a mechanically objective view of visual information that considers meaning as fixed within reality and inseparable from it. Such meaning can be reproduced and modified slightly, but *khronika*'s main allegiance remains preservation. These ideals did not replace one another as has been suggested at times. The two co-exist and give meaning to one another, pushing the documentary medium forward.

xvii. The imprint on documentary – a conclusion.

With the *kulturfilm* standing in for most feature-length non-fiction, *khronika* became synonymous with visual information. While the previous section considered how the *kulturfilm* contributed to *khronika*'s informational turn, in this final section I explore how the stabilization of *khronika* influenced the *kulturfilm* and documentary film, more generally. As we shall see, the apparent semantic stability of *khronika*, defined in the "strict, literal sense" as Brik put it, was largely an illusion, a case of instability transferred from one term to another.

Like *khronika*, the *kulturfilm* would undergo increasing scrutiny starting in 1927. Whereas newsreel was analyzed with respect to the individual shot—the overturned train in *Stride, Soviet!!* losing its facticity—the *kulturfilm* was questioned at the level of scenes with special attention paid to the practice of staging. The *New LEF* Symposium on Documentary held in 1927 marked a transition from one set of concerns to another. Many of its participants were *factographers* and the Symposium played a part in solidifying *khronika*'s definition as raw information. Echoing the accusation that *khronika* in Vertov's hands was made fictional, leading factographer Sergei Tretiakov proposed that the distinction between fiction and non-fiction was an arbitrary one altogether. In its place, Tretiakov argued, there is "a gradation in the falsification of the elements" of which any film is made.⁴²³

For Tretiakov, falsification meant "the arbitrary distortion, the displacement of genuine elements."⁴²⁴ Such distortion can exist in the selection of material, i.e. its

⁴²³ Jacobs ed., *The Documentary Tradition*, 30.

⁴²⁴ Jacobs ed., *The Documentary Tradition*, 30.

relationship to reality as a whole, but was also a function of "the placement of the camera and the selection of lighting" as well as "by the director's montage."⁴²⁵ The amount of falsification determined into which of Tretiakov's three categories the footage would fall into. "The first – raw material; the second – staged; and the third – fictional."⁴²⁶ Tretiakov defines "staging" as work with non-actors: "A person is taken as material: his material qualities, habits, and automatic movements correspond with the figure, which is needed on the screen."⁴²⁷

As with Vertov's theory of the interval, which reduced film meaning to the constants of visual experience, Tretiakov's focus on "material qualities" takes the "raw material" of newsreel as the theoretical ground zero from which filmmaking begins. Gan does something similar in "On the Organization of Life" when he claims *khronika* was the foundation of all film practice. Tretiakov's tri-partite division of footage, however, also renders the line between reality and fiction obsolete. According to Tretiakov, Eisenstein's casting based on the appropriateness of "face, manner, and walk" was an example of "staging" and no different from a documentary in which a subject reenacts a moment of his or her daily life for the camera. The third alternative, fictional footage, delineated the other extreme and stood for the exaggerated and affected acting characteristic of Western melodramas and 19th century theatre acting.

With respect to documentary, Tretiakov's tri-partite division pushes non-fiction further away from production-based definitions. The historical existence of the referent no longer played a deciding role. For Tretiakov, the practice of "staging" does not refer to the circumstances of filming but to a standard of verisimilitude, reminiscent of the one

⁴²⁵ Jacobs ed., *The Documentary Tradition*, 31.

⁴²⁶ Jacobs ed., *The Documentary Tradition*, 31.

⁴²⁷ Jacobs ed., *The Documentary Tradition*, 31.

embraced by Italian neo-realists in the aftermath of the Second World War. Closer to Tretiakov's own time, John Grierson, understood the term *documentary* in a similarly neo-realist key, as the dramatization of reality. Picking out his favorite Soviet documentaries, Grierson chose Dovzhenko's fictional *Earth* along with Viktor Turin's *Turksib*.⁴²⁸

In practical terms, Tertiakov's model impacted the way that the process of documentary filmmaking was understood. Reflecting on his experience making *To The Happy Harbor* (1929), Vladimir Erofeev, Russia's leading *kulturfilm* director, described three possible approaches to filming a documentary scene: "Any sequence can be filmed in one of three ways. First, using 'staging.' Second, by organizing the material. Third, by documentary shooting."⁴²⁹ By documentary shooting, Erofeev means something like Vertov's "life caught unaware" wherein meaning is conveyed by the actual event rather than by editing ("organizing the material") or re-enactment. Erofeev goes on to explain that in trying to capture the scene in question—the arrival of a steamship from America—direct documentary shooting was the only sensible alternative.

Writing in 1927, Tretiakov presents "staging" in a neutral light. Factographers generally did not cast judgment on "staging" because their concern was with purifying *khronika* and not with questioning *kulturfilms*. As the focus in the critical discourse moves from one to the other, staging emerges in a controversial light and dominates documentary discourse until the mid-1930s.⁴³⁰ Esfir Shub, for example, would rail against the *kulturfilm* for its combination of documentary and staged material. According

⁴²⁸ Grierson, *Grierson on Documentary*, 125.

⁴²⁹ Erofeev, Vladimir "On Documentary Shooting" in *Владимир Алексеевич Ерофеев (1898-1940)* (Moscow: Kino-Museum, 1998), 23.

⁴³⁰ For more on this see July, *Документальный иллюзион* ch. 1

to Shub, the staged material failed to convince on its own and only mitigated the power of the non-fiction material and of the film as a whole.⁴³¹ Erofeev would similarly insist on documentary shooting as the preferred alternative.

By contrast, the documentarians that win official favor during the 1930s—Yan Poselski, Mikhail Sliuzkoj, Roman Karmen among others—defended the practice of staging with reference to the film's overall meaning and ideological message. Framed in terms of essences, the documentary debates of the 1930s disparaged excessive attention to the purity of facts, seeing such tendencies the symptoms of "LEFism," a factographic disease of the 1920s that emerged after a *kinok* infestation. By 1931, "factography" would be a term of abuse in the writing about documentary. No longer set into different camps, Vertov, Erofeev and Shub would be seen as one group, all three relics of a bygone era. All of them were considered formalists, a term that in the 1930s had become an insult.

The subject of staging in Soviet documentary is beyond the scope of this dissertation. It comes with its own precursors and origins. I make mention of it here to indicate that *khronika's* pendulum-like trajectory during the 1920s continues in the discourse surrounding documentaries of the 1930s. I believe it continues into the present day. The formalist critics were correct to say that "art periodically undergoes a re-emphasis on raw material" and *khronika* is not an exception to this.⁴³² This dissertation has argued that in documentary film the concern with raw material is more than a recurring aesthetic virtue and is constitutive of the medium as a whole. The braiding of record and argument is, from the earliest days, the operative mechanism that gives birth to many of the earliest innovations. The vacillation between the film and the archive has

⁴³¹ Shub, *Жизнь моя – кинематограф*, 265.

⁴³² Jacobs ed., *The Documentary Tradition*, 33.

been a part of *khronika*'s story since 1918, when Grigori Boltianski was reluctant to hand over archival pre-Revolutionary newsreel to be compiled into *The Anniversary of the Revolution*.

Throughout this work, I have placed *khronika* into dialogue with the artistic paradigms prominent in the Soviet Union during its first ten years. I've considered the role of the newspaper as a model; the influence of early film genres, such as the kino-lectures and agit-film; the Constructivist sway of tectonics, as well as the transition from *faktura* to factography with its photographic understanding of fact. In discussing these influences, I have returned to the question of medium specificity and showed *khronika*'s uniqueness as a time-based informational medium, responsible to two competing theories of meaning.

At the same time, I have tried to ground the Soviet discourse around *khronika* by relating it philosophical analyses of meaning, its form, individuation, and source. I've done this because I believe the story of *khronika* is foundational for documentary as a whole. It reveals documentary's origins as a medium for making sense by placing a magnifying glass over the brief moment in history when non-fiction breaks with its predecessors. I have elaborated several consequences of this hypothesis, drawing on the writing of leading documentary scholars, and tested them against the historical evidence.

Starting in 1917 with *A Free Russia* journal, Soviet *khronika* moved away from its allegiance to the individual event and destabilized the information/illustration divide that had been dominant until then. The early work of Vertov and his kinoks has been of central importance in this development. *Kino-Pravda*, in particular, stands out as the laboratory in which many of the assumptions about the form of newsreel are challenged

and new organizational possibilities are discovered. More clearly than with any other body of work that I've come across, *Kino-Pravda's* gradual break with the newsreel journal format embodies the tension at work in documentary's two claims.

While *Kino-Pravda* has been the subject of the most in-depth analysis, I have tried to see formal development as both the product of a filmmakers' innovation but also as a consequence of historical factors that shaped the production of newsreel during the first half of the 1920s. The absence of film stock from the Soviet Union for much of the period under review placed overdetermined emphasis on editing. The initial shortages had rippling effects as many newsreel workers learned their craft by recycling and reappropriating footage, thus constantly exploring the semantic flexibility of documentary footage.

Despite their varying approaches to working with non-fiction footage, Lev Kuleshov's *On The Red Front*, the compilations of Esther Shub, the *kulturfilms* of Vladimir Erofeev and Yakov Bliokh, Dziga Vertov's experiments—all represent the *khronika*-line of non-fiction filmmaking. These filmmakers came of age when the shot's potential meaning was a question taken up actively and consistently. More than anything, it is this sensitivity to the elusive question of what documentaries mean that distinguishes the Soviet tradition and makes it such a rich case study.⁴³³ The story of Soviet *khronika*

⁴³³ To my mind, there is no greater illustration of this than Vladimir Erofeev's beginnings as a filmmaker. Erofeev returned to the Soviet Union from his trip to Germany enamored with the possibility of becoming a film-explorer, of using the movie camera to document his travels across the world like Colin Ross in Germany or Robert Flaherty in the United States. And Erofeev would eventually become just that, making a series of travelogue *kulturfilms* that would take him to Afghanistan, Central Asia, and back to Germany for the aforementioned *To The Happy Harbor*. But his first film, *Beyond the Polar Circle* (1927), did not involve a polar expedition and was largely made up of footage from a 1913 Polar expedition by F. Bremer. Thus, even the man who is in part responsible for effectively precipitating the divide between the documentary and the compilation film, learned to make films by grappling and transforming the meaning and articulation of pre-existing footage.

and its first ten years invites us back to a moment when filmmakers first realize that shaping footage into a film impacts the material's meaning.

The story of *khronika* reveals not one ideology or artistic paradigm replacing another but a restless vacillation between documentary's two claims. The *incomplete conjunction* that characterizes the co-existence of record and interpretation is a point of origin for documentary at large. Some may say that the discussion of meaning in *khronika* does not apply to documentary at large; the incomplete conjunction of verbal and visual is less salient in observational cinema than in the found footage film. I would agree that the difference between them is one of degree. The found footage films of Emile de Antonio or Johan Grimonprez inevitably confront the *two claims hypothesis* at the level of the individual shot. At the other end of the documentary spectrum, observational films that pride themselves on non-intervention and on the preservation of lived experience face much the same questions. In direct cinema and ethnographic film, questions regarding the meaning of an individual shot are transplanted to a higher plane. In a similar way concern over the individuation of facts in *khronika*, would, by 1930, be transplanted to the practice of staging in the *kulturfilm*.

Aesthetic choices such as long-take photography, avoidance of continuity editing or non-synchronous sound, these principles may help dodge the question of whether a shot betrays its origins in the world. Yet the honest ethnographer must nonetheless ask whether the film as a whole betrays the reality it represents. Such questions are often discussed as a matter of "documentary ethics"; the subject exists outside of the film and the documentarian's responsibility is to that independent existence. I know no better illustration of this condition than an anecdote that Dai Vaughan offers in the preface to

For Documentary:

A film on which I worked included a female circumcision; and had covered this, as I recall, with a succession of long-held shots of people waiting outside the hut where the operation was taking place. During the discussion after a rough-cut viewing, three divergent views of this sequence were expressed. One personal suggested that, if we were not to see the surgery, we might at least be allowed to hear a scream or two to signal to the viewer the unpleasantness of what was occurring. Someone else had remarked that there had in fact been a scream recorded during this event, and that it would be perfectly legitimate for us to lay it over. But someone else again made the point that the scream had been such an exceptional feature of this ceremony that it would be a misrepresentation of the culture to include it. What is significant about these three views is that they reflect three distinct assumptions about the claim documentary stakes upon the world: in the first case, symbolic (a scream stands for pain); in the second, referential (this is what our equipment actually recorded); in the third, generalisatory (to include the atypical is misleading). This question, about the claim documentaries stake upon the world, is one that confronts us afresh, and in different ways, with every project. No simple answer can serve for all circumstances and no film editor can avoid fretting about such things.⁴³⁴

Vaughan is right that no simple answer exists for all circumstances and every documentary will grapple with the question in its own way. Whether such grappling takes place over the exact identity of a derailed train car in 1925 or over the way a film represents a society as a whole is, to my mind, beside the point.

The questions of film meaning that I've consider by looking at pieces of Soviet *khronika* are more important today than they have been at any time since the 1920s. Living in a time of *new media* and *big data* has meant that film records of the past are retrievable today in ways previously unimaginable. The power to retrieve footage with remarkable ease, whether from a footage stock house such as ITVS, a user-generated database such as YouTube or Vimeo, or a curated digital archive such as the one organized by Rick Prelinger (archive.org), has created a world in which our individual and collective pasts are always available to us, always within reach. The upsurge in documentary production has led many to consider our time the golden age of

⁴³⁴ Vaughan, *For Documentary*, xiii-xiv.

documentary.

We have seen that *khronika's* expansion into longer and more complex formats was inseparable from the development of a new formal vocabulary for non-fiction and new possibilities for its social uses. Something analogous is happening right now. Spurred by the availability of high-quality, relatively inexpensive recording technology, the documentary has been steadily moving into interactive formats. Transmedia projects such as *Bear 57*, *Condition 1*, *Journey to the End of Coal*, *The Interrupters Related Content*, *Granito*, *Mapping Main Street*, *A Moment in Time* have served as extensions of the traditional feature-length documentaries, an example of what Henry Jenkins calls "convergence culture."

In addition to supplementing old formats, interactive non-fiction projects have been carving out an independent niche for themselves as well. Film festivals increasingly showcase transmedia projects and most of the financing organizations have established special funds for interactive documentary media. We saw an analogous transition within *khronika*. As part of the transition from actuality, we saw spectators change the way they interact with the footage. They began to *read* the footage, inscribe it with meaning, instead of merely looking through the screen onto a world. The move from actuality necessitated a change in newsreel's mode of production, new formats, and a new understanding of documentary authorship. Today's transmedia documentary projects are asking something similar of us. *New media* has expanded traditional conceptions of authorship and introduced a triangular model that fuses content producers, infrastructure designers and interactive users into a new authorial entity. Increasingly, documentary media invites us to consider algorithmic writing as artistic practice. As was historically

the case with early non-fiction, many of the new transmedia projects are developed for educational purposes. As a result, the question of what happens to the meaning of documentary records in these new environments is one that, I suspect, will continue to be addressed in years to come. Putting documentary into dialogue with its early predecessors is my attempt at showing how one could begin to answer these questions.

Lastly, I suspect that the question of how the language of film transforms human thought will also acquire a deeply personal resonance in the years to come. The proliferation of video recording technology over the last century has made each subsequent generation the most documented one yet. The spread of digital technology over the last two decades has, no doubt, caused the amount of documentation to increase exponentially in recent years. The mania of the information age has been for production and dissemination rather than for synthesis and organization. A Russian formalist would argue that we are currently going through another epoch that emphasizes the raw material over the construction. The proliferation of user-generated content, often unedited and presented as a raw record, supports this view.

The story of *khronika* gives us equal reason to suppose that the pendulum will swing back in the near future. I suspect that every day there are more and more people who sit down to take stock of their growing photo archives, home movie collections, and bins of favorite YouTube clips. Some of them will try their hand at organizing this material into something larger, into a record that represents their lives. They will do so because they believe that scattered across shoe boxes, hard drives, and various recording formats, there are pieces of the past that can be reconstituted in a way that exceeds the sum of individual records. They may suspect that the feelings that these materials evoke

piece by piece can be purified and intensified and made to communicate their power and meaning to others.

Even those who have had little experience with film up to now will likely have a moment in their life when they attempt to organize the photographic traces that they've left behind. At that moment, they'll be taking the first step towards making a movie of their life, a documentary autobiography. And once all the material is brought together, they'll wonder how to begin this video memoir. Not content to simply lay out the past in order, many will look for another way to structure all that material. And as part of that search, they'll relive, in their own way, the story of *khronika*.