

V-v-Vertov R-r-Re-made

From Avant-garde Documentary to Participatory Culture: the Digital Journey of Man with a Movie Camera

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Abstract. The seminal work of pioneering avant-garde filmmaker Dziga Vertov, *The Man with the Movie Camera* (*Chevolek s kino-apparatom*, 1929) has given rise to a number of discussions about the documentary film genre and new digital media. By way of comparison with American artist Perry Bard's online movie project entitled *Man With a Movie Camera: The Global Remake* (2007), this article investigates the historical perspective of this visionary depiction of reality and its impact on the heralded participatory culture of contemporary digital media, which can be traced back to Russian Constructivism. Through critical analysis of the relation between Vertov's manifest declarations about the film medium and his resulting cinematic vision, Bard's project and the work of her chief theoretical inspiration Lev Manovich are examined in the perspective of "remake culture," participatory authorship and the development a documentary film language. In addition to this, possible trajectories from Vertov and his contemporary Constructivists to recent theories of "new materialism" and the notion of Man/Machine-co-operation is discussed in length.

Keywords: online documentary, participatory culture, digital culture, Russian Constructivism, film history, new materialism.

Vertov would likely declare a death sentence on the theatricality of imagining any reconstruction as the last word. He would insist upon the revolution in reality, the future improvements of the past, made possible – and visible and audible – as only the machine could make them.

Seth Feldman imagining the content of a contemporary manifesto written by Vertov (2007, 46.)

Introduction: Vertov and Bard

Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) is as an inevitable work within the history of avant-garde cinema. There are a number of reasons why this 68 minute long portrayal of urban Soviet life has been celebrated and echoed through subsequent

films, filmic movements, and theoretical practices. One of the most obvious and exemplified is the film's creation of an impressive and downright overwhelming vocabulary of formalistic innovations and creative recording methods. In a historical perspective, it is the combination of these film technical experiments with a specific ideology and a pronounced artist manifesto that has made *Man with a Movie Camera* a work of art, which has had a radical impact that reaches far beyond the traditional confines of cinema and into the workings of today's broader media landscape – at least according to some commentators and among these perhaps most notably software theoretician Lev Manovich, whose writings about Vertov's work, on a number of different levels, will be of crucial interest to the present article.

A reflection of this technical – and perhaps also socio-cultural – breakthrough in Vertov's film filtered through Manovich's analysis (2001) serves as the central point of departure for a study of the participatory online film *Man with a Movie Camera: The Global Remake* (<http://dziga.perrybard.net>). This project was initiated by American artist Perry Bard in 2007. As the title suggests, it is a reworking of Dziga Vertov's iconic film, but it is also concretely inspired by aforementioned Manovich's reading of Vertov's film, in which he in details sketches the lineage between Vertov's project and the so-called “language of new media” of contemporary digital culture.

The net-based version of Bard's radical take on the documentary film consists of visual material uploaded by users and fitted into Vertov's original temporal framework, double-screened online next to the original. This is all done automatically by a piece of software commissioned by Bard and developed by John Weir specifically for this work. By means of an algorithm, random recordings are picked from a continuously updated, user-generated database of contemporary footage [Fig. 1–2].

As the premise for our investigations, we will consider this aspect of Bard's remake to be the comparable equivalent to the privileged and complex position of the post-productive process of editing in Vertov's original. In both works, it is in fact a combination of the access to the world granted through the recording device (or in Bard's case the ubiquitously present recording devices) combined with the technological restructuring of this material that creates the basis for a fundamental reinterpretation of the medium, its social function and its potential as a common, linguistic expression.

However, as a remake, Bard's project is seemingly marked by a double ambition concerning Vertov's classic work. On the one hand, Bard attempts to make Vertov contemporary, that is, to bring the original up to speed with the “present level of development” of media (Benjamin 2008b, 90).¹ On the other hand, it is, of course,

1 The fact that Bard's project won an honorary mention in the Digital Communities

also an homage to Vertov, which, at least potentially, occasions the project with a somewhat retrospective aspect. As Vertov's work, Bard's remake was also made for public screenings. In this sense, as we will argue below, Bard's project echoes some of Walter Benjamin's thoughts on cinema and the movie theatre of especially the 1920s – perhaps concretely inspired by Vertov's depiction of the cinema-goers as a crowd? – as sites of “simultaneous collective experience” (2008b, 36) or “communal viewing” (Feldman 2010). Here the “masses come face to face with themselves” (Benjamin 2008a, 54) in a double sense: they can experience themselves *depicted as a crowd* in ways previous media could not (especially due to innovative experiments with camera angles and the composition of the shot); and they can *experience this as a crowd*, that is, together. Yet, as we will discuss, there is also another aspect of both experienced and practiced collectivity at stake in both projects (although in Vertov's mostly in embryonic form), namely that of collective production – or as it is often referred to in contemporary theory: co-production or co-creation.

Documentary and the Avant-Garde

According to the manifesto presented in the title sequence from Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera*, the film was in many ways the culmination of the director's overall ambition – in accordance with the notion of communism as a potentially global project – to forge a new filmic language of pure visual communication, the so-called Kino-Pravda (“Film Truth”), which was sometimes also referred to, or translated as “Absolute Kinography:”

“The *Man with the Movie Camera*

(An Excerpt from the Diary of a Cameraman)

ATTENTION VIEWERS:

THIS FILM

Represents in Itself

AN EXPERIMENTATION IN THE CINEMATIC COMMUNICATION

Of visual events

WITHOUT THE AID OF INTERTITLES

(A Film Without Intertitles)

WITHOUT THE AID OF A SCENARIO

category at Ars Electronica in 2008 does, of course, signal that Bard to some extent has achieved this ambition: this art/network of cinematic co-production, is – and not least: signals that it is – a “comrade of time” (Groys 2010).

(A Film Without a Script)

WITHOUT THE AID OF THEATER

(A Film Without Sets, Actors, etc.)

THIS EXPERIMENTAL WORK WAS MADE WITH THE INTENTION OF CREATING A TRULY INTERNATIONAL ULTIMATE LANGUAGE OF CINEMA ON THE BASIS OF ITS TOTAL SEPARATION FROM THE LANGUAGE OF THEATER AND LITERATURE²

This was to be achieved by purging the film medium from all the conventions that belonged to older, bourgeois art forms like theatre, literature, and their related creative expressions. It was Vertov's belief, that these creative expressions were defining characteristics of the staged film and therefore "antithetical to the spirit of the revolutionary times which required the cinema's goals to be in direct political alignment with those of the new socialist reality."³ Instead, he sought to replace these inherited conventions with an accentuation of new technically-based visual means of communication, that is montage, inventive camera work, and a variety of "special effects" made possible through this new medium.

Another important aspect, the notion of Absolute Kinography addressed, was the problems of geography and language barriers that the internationally aspiring communist state Soviet Russia was trying to overcome at the time. "The basis for our program," Vertov noted, "is a film bond between the peoples of the USSR and the entire world based on the decoding of what actually exists" (Fore 2010, 376). At the core of Vertov's poetology was thus the idea that the "visual language" of film would potentially be more unmediated, less marred by conventions, and thus not subject to the same kind of translational problems as for instance spoken language (not to mention the highly conventionalized bourgeois art forms).

In the context of the historical and comparative study presented here, it is important to take into account the critical reception of Vertov's film. When first presented, the director's revolutionary vision did not find a strong foothold among the Soviet public and contrary to his intentions, it was ignored by the masses. Furthermore, many of his contemporary peers found the film to be "inaccessible"

2 In the quoted manifesto for *The Man with the Movie Camera*, this is further formulated as Absolute Kinography, the formalistically and ideologically challenging development of Vertov's newsreel productions and what was to become his last silent film. Inherent to the term Kino-Pravda where not only the truth-seeking ambition of the documentary movement, but also its political motivation obviously signaled through the direct referencing of the official party newspaper.

3 As formulated by Vlada Petrić in his extensive study of Vertov's film and its connection to constructivism (Petrić 1987, 4).

and a strictly formal experiment.⁴ As such, the immediate response and fate of the film was typical for the reception of the avant-garde; Vertov's vision of an ambitious, universally appreciated film language was met with misconception, scepticism, and lack of interest. Only gradually did the reception of *The Man with the Movie Camera* change from the strictly technical virtuosity of the film to a more nuanced focus on the deeper aspects of its cinematic and ideological repercussions.

In this perspective, it is interesting to note, how the work in time has been bestowed with a canonical and defining status in connection to the development and understanding of new digital media. Here, the central focus has mostly been on the formalistic merits of Vertov's work. The most influential and indeed in its own right canonical examples of this reception is the aforementioned software theoretician Lev Manovich's positioning of *The Man with the Movie Camera* as an avant-garde blueprint for the montage-oriented mode of expression that has defined the development of digital media, that is, a purely visual organisation of the collected information (Manovich 2001, 239–240). We shall return later to this perception of Vertov's film as a structure which is comparable to the database and vice versa.

Another aspect to consider, but one that is surprisingly often faded into the background in the new media-historical readings of Vertov's work, is the intrinsic link between the technological conception presented through the film and an immediate understanding of the documentary as genre. Since Vertov's manifestly declared interest was to combine these two aspects in a radical different media expression: a new filmic language that redefines both the technical use *and* the conventions of depicting reality, it seems only reasonable to also invest a critical understanding of the remake in the reception of the original that went before its canonisation as a benchmark for understanding the development of new media.

As pointed out by radio and film historian Erik Barnouw, Vertov's career as a documentary filmmaker began in 1917–19 as an editor for the Cinema Committee in Moscow. Here his task was to assemble the incoming fragments of recordings into meaningful newsreels, which were then distributed by “agit-trains” and “agit-steamboats” across the country. The intention behind these films was of course highly propagandistic, but the organising principle of gathering recordings and creating an edited whole to be screened afterwards certainly appears as a noticeable connection between early Vertov and Bard's project. On an ironic historical note, one of the defining characteristics in Bard's ongoing collection of amateur recordings is our mobile technological ability – and tendency – to

4 Petrić points out that Vertov's famous contemporary Sergei Eisenstein even went so far as to call the film trickery (Petrić 1987, 78).

document everything we see, whereas a shortage of raw film during the revolution almost resulted in the impossibility to make any more newsreel documentaries at the time (Barnouw 1993, 52–55).

Concerning the other aspect of Vertov's filmmaking, his gradually radical experimentation with the formal structure of the documentary, this is what truly separates the original film from the remake and as we shall discuss later, what establishes two distinctly different filmic effects. Indeed it could be argued that *The Man with the Movie Camera*, which epitomises Vertov's groundbreaking work with technical experimentation (at the time under Stalinist view accused for being "formalism," which, of course, was the fate of almost any progressive Soviet art work of the period) is as much a film about "the magic of the medium," as it is a reflection about the medium itself. As so many other avant-garde ambitions, the intentions of Vertov can be seen as a double bind. Not only does he show us the world in a different light. But the poetic inspiration that makes this possible also takes on unintended meaning and even threatens to implode the powerful vision. Obvious examples could be the famous scene in which a movie theater "magically" comes to life with the chairs folding into place through stop-motion editing or as a whole frenetic, mechanical speed that drives most of the effects in the film and eventually makes it almost visually "collapse" [Fig. 3–4]. This does not necessarily signal a crisis of representation, but it places Vertov's film in an uncomfortable position halfway between visionary triumph and the excess of experimentation. Either way it places him firmly in an avant-garde tradition that desperately tries to break the boundaries of genre and define a new type of cinematic imagery. In his seminal work on documentary film, Bill Nichols even accentuates the ironic historical perspective on Vertov's specific form of essentialist cinema. He calls attention to the fact that Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin coined the term *cinéma vérité* (French for Kino Pravda), as an homage to Vertov, even though his avant-garde sensibilities precisely never motivated him to coin the genre "documentary." A phrase intended to signal the privileged access to the truth through the medium of film, ended up being associated with a "delimited sub-genre of participatory documentary" (Nichols 2001, 144).

In this perspective, one might even argue, that Vertov, despite the fierce critique of Art-with-a-capital-A he expressed in for instance the manifesto of the opening titles of *Man With a Movie Camera*, actually continues the so-called "speculative tradition" of modern art and aesthetic thinking, as it has been coined by Jean-Marie Schaeffer (2000), by praising the new cinematic art as yet another speculative enterprise. Although this happens in a much more directly mediated sense than

most aesthetic philosophers of the 18–19th centuries imagined, it nonetheless goes to show that Vertov's cinematic enterprise and its preoccupation with what we might term “ocular truth” is not that alien from one of the main trajectories of modern art, as he himself would have claimed. To this, one could also mention his obvious inclination towards, or at least: reluctance to let go of the figure of auteurship (cf. it's about *the man* with the movie camera).

Camera, Ideology, and (Scientific) Truth

Integral to the genre-analytical focus on this challenge of the documentary form and the use of filmic effects is the equally important socio-cultural aspect of *The Man with the Movie Camera*. As pointed out by film scholar Annette Michelson, Vertov ultimately aimed to optimize both the art of “decoding life as it is” and the communicative transference of this flow of information onto the viewer in the service of communist “revelation” (Michelson 1984, xiv). Following this, it seems no coincidence that Vertov's movie (and subsequently also Bard's remake) exhibits communication technologies and use of media in abundance: both *recording* and *playing* devices as well as telephones, telegraphs, and so on; of course also including the different *settings* of mass communication, most famously the aforementioned meta-significance of the movie theatre. As an indicative coincidence, those scenes involving communication technologies and the specific situations related to them, are the ones that most often get remade for Bard's project. Yet, as we will argue below, this is, in fact, no coincidence at all. It might instead be the logical result of Bard technologically orchestrating not all the recordings of the camera, but all the cameras recording [Fig. 5].

Vertov's double agenda of *recording* and *revealing* manifested itself on a number of levels: Most notably, through – at the time – pioneering ocular intrusions into hitherto unseen everyday, intimate locations like the bedroom, the birth bed, and the divorce registration office – most of them “accessed” through new visual perspectives. This reflects the socio-cultural setting of the camera and cinema within communist Soviet society proposed by Vertov, namely, what he refers to as an epistemologically privileged “Communist decoding of reality” (Vertov 1984, 50), thus postulating this epistemological capacity as the common denominator of the camera and Marxism-as-science, which was the way it was perceived in Russia at that time (Fer 1989), rather than as a political ideology competing with other ideologies as it was later to be perceived as. Indicative of this, Vertov himself explicitly draws parallels between the eye-opening experience of the

complex structures in his own films and “serious essays by Engels and Lenin” (Drobashenko 1966, 71).

These ideas are similar to the way Walter Benjamin, immediately after having discussed Russian cinema and the technique of montage, described how the relationship between the camera and reality was often perceived. In a number of Benjamin’s writings on the technology of the camera and its epistemological capabilities, we thus find numerous phrasings that emphasize the close relationship between the camera and the new sciences of the time. Drawing parallels to Sigmund Freud’s *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901), which according to the first draft of Benjamin’s so-called Artwork-essay “isolated and made analyzable things which had heretofore floated along unnoticed in the broad stream of perception,” the emergence of film “has brought about a similar deepening of apperception” (Benjamin 1998). “It is through the camera,” Benjamin notes, “that we first discover the optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis” (2008a, 37). Thus, it also becomes “another nature which speaks to the camera as compared to the eye. ‘Other’ above all in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious” (2008a, 37). Similarly, Benjamin in another passage also points to this technology-induced change in our human apparatus of perception, although this time drawing analogies between the surgeon and the cameraman. Whereas the painter “maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, [...] the cinematographer penetrates deeply into its tissue” (2008a, 35). This operation “brings to light entirely new structures of matter” (2008a, 37), as Benjamin puts it, hereby – perhaps not consciously; it is most likely something he picked up indirectly through Sergei Tretjakov (Fore 2006a), whom he specifically drew on in his essay from 1943, “The Author as Producer” (2008b), or during his visit to Russia in 1926–27 – alluding to the scientific work on so-called “tektology” done by Aleksandr Bogdanov in the preceding decade. We will return to this particular lineage in more detail below. Suffice to say for now, Vertov on many levels actually seems to be the case Benjamin is thinking of, when he claims that to “demonstrate the identity of the artistic and scientific uses of photography which heretofore usually were separated will be one of the revolutionary functions of the film” (1998).

Vertov’s double agenda of *recording* and *revealing* did, however, also manifest itself by way of the camera’s playful self-exploration. In sequence after sequence, daring and imaginative stunts are performed to illustrate the explorative relation between the recording device and the world [Fig. 6–7]. As pointed out by

Seth Feldman: “the engine of Vertov’s generative power is a creative dialectic between his two central ideas – Life Caught Unawares (that is the dedication to an unmediated recording of reality) and the Kino-eye (an equally emphatic commitment to presenting the world through the enhanced vision of machines)” (Feldman 2010). In this there is, of course, an obvious paradox, namely, the fact that the (seemingly) unmediated reality revealed by the camera is fundamentally a product of the operations of the media itself. Or as put by Benjamin: “the presentation of reality in film [...] provides the equipment-free aspect of reality [...], and does so precisely on the basis of the most intensive interpretation of reality with equipment” (2008a, 35). Thus, in this sense *The Man with the Movie Camera* simultaneously investigates its own artistic means *and* the (potential) socio-cultural settings of the camera and cinema within communist Soviet society.

Re-Make Culture – Reimagining, Remixing, or Remastering?

As mentioned earlier, Vertov’s fascination with the medium takes on an almost delirious form by the ending of the film, with multitudes of superimposed images and a greatly accelerated editing speed. It certainly appears like the “personified” camera has some difficulties comprehending the overwhelming pulse of modern life, or at least Vertov’s concluding presentation of the recorded footage signals a chaotic, kaleidoscopic, and imposing overflow of visual information.

This is, however, an aspect of the film’s reception, which is not discussed that often, and it is also left out of Manovich’s buoyant media genealogical interpretation of Vertov’s avant-garde experiment. Yet, if this is the case, how should it then be interpreted? Is this really Vertov’s implicit critique of the “scientific urge” (Alifragkis and Penz 2009, 145) of contemporary Soviet society, and in particularly the conception that the camera could intrude anywhere and neutrally channel and “decode life as it is?” And could it perhaps even be interpreted as a critique of the “informational ideology” in more general terms – and if so: could it have some bearing on contemporary thought? Is this apparent “information overload” in other words the exact moment Vertov displays the “right tendency” (*Tendenz*) Benjamin would most likely have expected from him (Benjamin 2008b, 80–81)?

However, if we, like most interpretations, simply ignore this apparent “break down” at the end of *The Man with the Movie Camera*, Vertov’s cinematic project could actually in quite meaningful ways be perceived as some kind of “pre-

infinite bandwidth” – approached akin to the one later promoted by George Gilder in his book on the socio-cultural, political, and economic promises of the infinite bandwidth of the coming age of Telecosm (2000). According to this quite early, seminal diagnosis of the Internet (in particular fiber optics as a technology of distribution), a host of Modernity’s greatest problems and conflicts could potentially be resolved by the emergence of infinite bandwidth Internet and the communication power it brings along, which, among other things, would empower anyone with sufficient information (for instance to access the archive of cultural artifacts, knowledge, facts, etc.). But if we contrary to this understanding take into the account the information overload – reading of the final scenes in Vertov’s movie, that we are proposing here, it actually becomes quite paradoxical that Gilder himself explicitly drew on Vertov’s and the Stenberg Brothers’ visuals on the cover of his book arguing for a happier and more prosperous, information-based future [Fig. 8–9]. Tapping *this* unreflected onto the “engineering iconography” of the Constructivists (Taylor 2006, 454), the material packaging of Gilder’s utopian techno-vision, definitely comes off as both a more ideologically and historically predetermined remake of the experimental “machine aesthetics” that permeates the imagery of Vertov and his contemporaries.

However, according to Lev Manovich (1999, 2001, 2013), whom Perry Bard explicitly mentions as the *key* inspiration for her work, the efforts by Dziga Vertov (and a number of like-minded avant-garde artists) did, in fact, turn out to be the building blocks of new media and contemporary computer culture, as we know it today, but in quite another way than Gilder envisioned. Manovich even claims that morphologically speaking, the newness of new media is really highly exaggerated: “the allegedly unique principles of new media can already be found in cinema” (2001, 11). For example, the various forms of montage explored by Vertov has, according to Manovich, played a crucial role in the invention of overlapping windows in HCI, as well as in establishing a broader notion of remixing the archive/database.

He already addresses the idea of modularity in his definition of the database as “symbolic form.” Here the subdivision of the digital artifacts into objects is defined with a specific emphasis on their accessibility (the user’s navigation of the database), a media-specific characterisation that points towards the exchangeability of the different elements, which comprises the whole. This leads on to Manovich’s central interest in “the projection of the ontology of a computer onto culture itself,” which is determined by the double logic of data structures and algorithms, that is, the basic technical terms for organisation of information

and the operation performed for a specific task. This relationship is further mirrored in the database and the narrative, Manovich's central concepts for the understanding of new media objects and their link to earlier cultural expressions. As he points out, in their essence, they are all databases, since every element is part of an interchangeable structure. Thus, in Manovich's following genealogy between avant-garde film and digital media, his reading of Vertov's film is primarily focused on its merging of database and narrative in the presentation of documented reality. One of the most notable points derived from this characterisation of *The Man with the Movie Camera* as database cinema is the interpretation of media form as filmic content. It accentuates one of the features, which makes the film so consistently relevant for our understanding of digital media: it is a continuous demonstration of photographic images turned into film effects through editing and composition (Manovich 2001, 241–242). In this perspective, one could argue that the film to a certain degree is dictated by the self-exploration of the medium – with each new discovery of the world through the camera, another scene is added to the collection, a collection that does indeed appear endlessly alterable because of the ingenious and continuously accelerated editing. This is precisely what constitutes the avant-garde positioning of the film and certainly also what motivates Manovich's interest in establishing Vertov as an avant-garde predecessor for both digital media and his own theory about its language structure. As pointed out by Seth Feldman, this perspective on the avant-garde lifts the film out of a strictly modernist understanding of documentary (according to which Vertov's film is perceived as the less technologically developed version of *cinéma vérité*) towards what he determines as a post-modern appropriation, that is, a McLuhanesque condition, where new media is constructed out of, and incorporates older media.⁵ This further results in anachronism losing its conventional meaning, and as Feldman eloquently and interestingly puts it “The past becomes that which can be re-mastered – and was never anything else” (Feldman 2007, 45). In the case of Bard's remake, the obvious examples of these aspects of variability and automation would be how John Weir's software daily re-edits the film (by randomly circulating the uploaded scenes). This software algorithm thus becomes comparable to a creative co-producer of the screened filmic remake. Following Feldman's radical understanding of remastering, one could even consider these algorithmic presentations of the documentary content from the user-generated database to be, if not the aesthetically satisfying,

5 This media-genealogy is Feldman's interpretation of the heritage from McLuhan found in Manovich's definition of *new*, digital media (Feldman 2007, 45–46).

then the logical fate of Vertov's vision. Afterall, on a material level *The Global Remake* does indeed present the reconstruction of reality as something endlessly interchangeable, and by using Vertov as its formalistic inspiration makes us question to which degree the remaking-process is taking place in the territory of remastering or remixing.

Speaking of remixing in the light of Bard's work, might in the end be somewhat misleading, because the remake begs crucial questions concerning the relationship between the technique of montage and the "found"/pre-existing visual material; especially given the fact that only "original" uploaded material (that is: material which does not violate any copyright) is allowed. Where is the "re" in the "mix"?, one might ask, since the form – that is: the temporal fitting of the different scenes – is already given, and the database on the other hand is virtually non-existent having fundamentally been transformed into yet another "zero-stock," just-in-time production facility. (This last aspect has, of course, changed during the now 5 year lifespan of the project.) How is the idea of the remixed archive of found visual material sustainable at all, if the "pre-existence" and "foundness" of the submitted material primarily seems to be illusory and to some extent a by-product of the fact that it is predominantly recorded by mobile devices and their "proximity to reality"-effect. This seems to make "reality itself" the archive material, rather than the visual recordings thereof, and as such invokes the expanded concept of remastering, much more than the deconstructive notions of the remix.

Comradely Media

Vertov's work is permeated by a visible excitement about the technological possibilities of this – at the time – fairly new art form. In his writings on film, the camera even takes on anthropomorphic qualities and it is treated like an autonomous entity: "I am kino-eye, I am a mechanical eye. I, a machine, show you the world as only I can see it" (Michelson 1984, 60). In her (re)interpretation of this constructivist manifesto, Bard goes so far as to determine Vertov's statement like the description of a cyborg, as a perceiving subject halfway between human and machine (or perhaps within the frame of "posthumanism") [Fig. 10].

But maybe the notion of cyborgs (or posthumanism) isn't the only way to look at this? Maybe Man and machine/technology/media are not fused within Man, or within the machine for that sake, but in the world out there, that is, in a much "flatter ontology" (DeLanda 2004). Indicative of this could be the way Vertov's intense preoccupation with the medium sometimes actually seems to suggest

that the recording device takes on the role as trigger mechanism for human activity. This is illustrated quite literally in the opening sequence from the movie theater, where the projection of the film seems to animate life and make the entire orchestra awake from their exaggerated, frozen postures. This points to another crucial theme in Vertov's movie, namely human co-operation and co-habitation with new machinery and technology (primarily industry, transportation, and communication, including the camera and the all apparatuses of the movie theatres). In more contemporary theoretical terms, particularly those of the so-called "new materialism" (inspired by Latournian Actor-Network-Theory), one would say that all these technologies – or "things" as they are often referred to in this school of thought in order to sublate the traditional Subject/Object-distinction, which is always anthropocentric – exist on the same level as men (and women) and to a large extent possess the same degree of agency; hence also the term "actants" (rather than "actor") applied to all the entities present in the hybrid ontology of the social ensemblage (Latour 1996).

Once again, there is a thread back to Vertov's time, which astoundingly seldom has been pointed out, if ever. Within Constructivist literature of the 1920s, the term 'factography' was evoked to describe a double function of things, objects, or in this case literary language. Quoting Tretjakov, Devin Fore thus notes that factography actually "had nothing to do with the 'naive and lying verisimilitude' of bourgeois realism's aesthetic of resemblance. Rather, its interventionist, operative aesthetic called upon the producer 'not simply to depict life, but to create it anew in the process'" (Fore 2006b, 101). Parallel to this, Benjamin once again actually comes close to nailing it, claiming that "film is thus the first artistic medium which is able to show how matter plays havoc with human beings [*wie die Materien dem Menschen mitspielt*]."⁶ It follows that films can be an excellent means of materialistic exposition" (2008a, 47). The important addition to this should be, that in Vertov's case, the camera is not univocally attributed an epistemologically privileged position somewhere outside *looking in* or *at* (and subsequently able to display it, cf. "exposition"), but rather on the very same level of Man and matter. The camera does not just show this entanglement; or if so, it *shows by example*, namely: by performing this very kind of interaction itself. Thus, as mentioned before, the camera itself – perhaps somewhat mystically, especially to those of us that are not accustomed to the materialist thought of Constructivism

6 Obviously, the English translation in this particular passage is unfortunately not sufficiently precise to capture how Benjamin seems to imagine matter and humans as "players on the same field."

– occasionally seems to animate the world. A point that of course becomes even more pressing in contemporary media-saturated society, where ubiquitous media to a much larger degree than previously are not just representations, but also real objects that have actual functions within the world (Bolter and Grusin 2001, 58). In fact, one could perhaps even argue that this is also the overall theme of Bard's project: the new affordances of creative cooperation of digital media technologies, and how the latter perhaps even have become co-participants in the remastering of the material (and ideational) world.

In both Vertov and Bard – as well as in the contemporary material cultures within which they respectively are situated and operate – machines and the relationship between them and us, do mean a great deal. Thus, as already indicated, a particularly interesting precursor can be found in post-revolutionary Soviet Russia, where the political levelling of the Man/Object-relation can be found in Russian Constructivism and its particular materialism. In 1927, Aleksandr Rodchenko famously stated that “the light from the East is in the new relation to the person, to woman, to things. Our things in our hands must be equals, comrades, and not these black and mournful slaves, as they are here” (Kiaer 2005, 1). In a vein similar to this “reist utopia” (Margolin 1997, 10) anticipated by Rodchenko, co-constructivists El Lissitzky and Ilya Ehrenburg had in 1922 declared that: “to us art is the CREATION of NEW OBJECTS.... But it should by no means be supposed that by objects we mean household articles. Of course we see genuine art in utilitarian objects produced in factories, in the airplane or the automobile. But we do not wish to limit the production of artists to utilitarian objects. Any organized work – a HOUSE, a POEM or a PAINTING – is an EXPEDIENT OBJECT (*tselesoobraznaia veshch'*) that does not isolate people from life but helps them to organized it” (Kiaer 2005, 14). Thus, as pointed out by Christina Kiaer, a substantial part of the statements and practices of Russian Constructivism can actually be seen as a way of trying to elaborate a notion of the true “comradely object of socialist modernity,” or simply: “socialist objects” or “the object-as-comrade” (Kiaer 2005, 1); an ambition which, of course, ought to be seen in opposition to the reified, fetishistic relationship western man had to the capitalist commodity. Constructivism's much debated attempts to assign a new social function to art at the service of the Revolution – which was framed as an “UNCOMPROMISING WAR ON ART!,” as Alexei Gan famously put it also in 1922 (Gan 1974, 37), and which Vertov echoes in his opening titles – was not merely about art, but even more importantly: about figuring out a new way of approaching and handling materiality, thus attributing it a socio-economic/

political role “as an active, almost animate participant in social life” (Kiaer 2005, 1). Or as another Constructivist philosopher, Boris Arvatov, put it: materiality and human practice should even be “connected like ‘coworkers’” (1997, 124), insisting that Socialist Man should shed himself of the dualist rupture between things and people, material and ideal, matter and spirit – all of them philosophically founded in bourgeois ideology of private property and commodity relations – and instead enter “into an active, creative contact with the world of Things” (Arvatov 1997, 123; cf. also Kiaer 2005, 30).

This argument mirrors some of the general ideas in Leon Trotsky’s essays, *The Problems of Everyday Life* first voiced in *Pravda* during the early 1920s. According to Trotsky – who was, of course, even less focussed on the role of art in particular – “the new generation is destined to learn [communism] in the elements of construction, the elements of construction of everyday life” (Trotsky 1973 [1924], 70). Here, the site of both struggle and the measure of the (success of the) Revolution is the everyday and the active (re)construction of its materiality, as one might frame it to get a grasp of the further trajectory this line of thought subsequently was to have into the theories and practices of for instance architecture (especially through the traditions of VKhUTEMAS and Bauhaus), as well as into recent notions of the digital and remixing the archive/database and hence perhaps even the whole present entanglement of on/offline-reality, which is, of course, both the theme of Bard’s remake and its structural condition.

Although Devin Fore certainly overstates the point when insisting on making Vertov (and his cinematic project) the sole protagonist of this kind of Constructivist materialism, he still makes a valid point when he claims that it is: “the work of the Soviet documentarian Dziga Vertov that takes us beyond a long-established conception of the political as something coextensive with the faculty of language itself (‘political consciousness is perhaps nonexistent outside of the logos,’ writes Roland Barthes), and relocates the site of political activity and agency instead within modern processes of technical making. For Vertov, politics emerges out of matter rather than discourse” (Fore 2010, 369).

Besides its parallels to Bruno Latour’s notion of a more object-oriented *Dingpolitik*, a “parliament of things” (2005), this concept of a “politics of matter” is quite interesting also on a more historical note. If we accept this lineage dating back to Constructivism and its particular kind of materialism (“factography”), which could certainly seem to be a “secret passenger” of both Manovich’s and thus subsequently also Bard’s conceptual framework, there are also some interesting parallels between then and now on the micro-ontological levels, as

we might call them in lack of better words. Here we are particularly referring to what has now become known as the digitality of the computer (and perhaps also its culture in more general terms (Gere 2008, 16). In fact, the trajectory leading to the language and operations of new media could perhaps also be traced back to Aleksandr Bogdanov's proto-cybernetic, perhaps even proto-digital⁷ meta-science "tektology." This "universal organizational science" (Bogdanov 2003, 30) was developed in the years preceding the Russian Revolution and subsequently adopted and developed further by some of the main advocates of Constructivism and Productivism as well as a central figure of the legendary Constructivist journal *Novyi LEF*, Sergei Tretjakov (Fore 2006a). Bogdanov's work, which he himself described as a "uniquely holistic and uniquely monistic understanding of the Universe" (Bogdanov 2003, 4), had as its crucial tenet that all of material and social reality was structured in analogous ways (today we would say that "all is digital"), thus leaving it all open to the manipulative operations of a so-called "monistic culture of organized production," which would include all kinds of productive practice ranging "from literacy to electrification, from romantic love to eugenics, from poetry to technical standardization" (Bogdanov quoted in Fore 2006a, 12). According to Bogdanov, Man thus "has no task and no activity, other than the organization" of the materials of technological, social, and cultural reality, since "we, people, are organizers of nature, of ourselves, and of our experience; [...] our practice, cognition and creativity" (Bogdanov 2003, 3). Shedding – by the interventions of new materialist theory – Bogdanov's still somewhat anthropocentric conception of organizing the world, the World of Man comes to be perceived as a place than can be re-mixed, for instance by using (or collaborating with) different material technologies.

From Passive Audiences to (Digital) Co-Producers

Following the advent of digital media and more specifically online video-sharing websites, collective creation, and (re)structuring of the database has become increasingly important in the production and theoretical conceptualization of contemporary cinema and film culture in general. It goes without saying that this is by no means irrelevant to Bard's project; especially given the fact that it is this specific trajectory – exemplified by Vertov read by and through Manovich

7 Charlie Gere (2008) has proposed the notion of digital culture as a cultural logic based on discrete elements that actually precedes digital technology/media, but makes no mention of Bogdanov's "tektology." Perhaps he should have.

– that has served as Bard’s key inspiration, which makes it plausible to perceive Bard’s project as an attempt to translate and reframe Vertov’s project within a new media ecology.

Yet, as already argued, it is not just Vertov’s particular project that is actualized in Bard’s remake. Bard’s work also seems to invoke or actualize – although not quite as explicitly as the reference to Vertov – a number of more general, socio-structural, and socio-economic aspirations of some of Vertov’s contemporaries among the Russian Constructivists, especially the so-called Productivists’ ambition of an overall transformation of the process of work, and in extension of this turning the ordinary citizen-workers into creative co-producers (Bann 1974, Andrews and Kalinovska 1975, Lodder 1983, Gough 2005). However, this is not, as imagined *then*, achieved simply by declaring “uncompromising war on art” (Gan 1974 [1922], 37) and moving “from the easel to the machine” (Tarabukin 1923) or “into production” (Brik 1974 [1923]), hereby turning *factories* into “instruments of collective creativity” (Gough 2005, 155), but rather through the use of the ‘superlative objects’ (Barthes 1972, 88) of *our* contemporary society, namely: new digital media ‘technologies of creative cooperation’ (Saveri, Rheingold and Vian 2005) at the heart of the ‘convergence culture’ (Jenkins 2006) of Web 2.0.

Although this trajectory is not part of Bard’s explicit reference to Manovich’s reading of Vertov (from *The Language of New Media*), it does, however, inadvertently(?) echo the main tenets of Manovich’s seminal essay “Avant-Garde as Software” (1999) and especially his recent book *Software Takes Command* (2013), which to a much higher degree takes on the socio-political dimensions of new digital media as the (supposed) realization of the societal aspirations of Russian avant-garde movements as well. As its title, *The Language of New Media*, also suggests, Manovich’s book on cinema – in explicit contrast to the focus on sociological, economic, and political dimensions in other contemporary studies (cf. 2001, 12) – almost singularly focussed on the language-aspects of new media.

In this sense, Manovich’s way of looking at the relationship between different media like cinema/film and digital media in *The Language of New Media* almost exclusively adheres to the ‘media grammar literacy’ (or ‘media as language’-metaphor) described by Joshua Meyrowitz in his essay on what kind of ‘media literacies’ we use (or metaphors we apply), when we conceptualize our objects of study within media studies (Meyrowitz 1998, 99–103). To a large extent, this is also the kind of literacy that has prevailed in the reception history of Vertov as an auteur primarily experimenting with the formal language of cinema (for instance with reference to his intention of creating an ‘Absolute Kinography’).

In contrast, the essence of Bard's project can best be grasped if we make a shift in perspective (or applied 'media literacy') towards the notion of media as 'setting or environment,' in which the focus – in extension of how media is analyzed in Marshall McLuhan's 'medium theory' – is primarily on "how the nature of the medium shapes key aspects of the communication on both the micro-, single-situation level and on the macro-, societal level" (Meyrowitz 1998, 103).⁸ When thinking in terms of 'medium literacy,' as Meyrowitz simply refers to it, the social, communicative setting is thus regarded as something that is "fostered by a medium" (Meyrowitz 1998, 106). It is in extension of this line of thought (or literacy) we should thus see Bard's project as principally focussed on what kinds of communicative human interactions new digital media foster or afford, what kind of socio-structural shifts occur, etc.; for instance in relation to previously much criticized passive media consumption *versus* so-called produsage (Bruns 2008), where co-producers actively and creatively participate in the digital remix culture and where amateurs increasingly outperform professionals (Manovich 2013). Here, the remix has become default, in contrast to previously (cf. Barthes 1977, Eco 1989, etc.) where remixing, quoting, and so on was an aesthetic option among other options. Now, remix has become an overarching metaphor for a number of media-related, but not necessarily media-specific operations, which the person formerly known as the passive recipient of mass media content did not possess the means to achieve.

In this, we once again encounter an (implicit?) legacy from Benjamin's writings. In his short essay, *The Newspaper*, Walter Benjamin emphasised that in the Soviet Russian Press of his time "the indiscriminate assimilation of facts goes [hand in hand with] the equally indiscriminate assimilation of readers, who are instantly elevated to the level of collaborators. [...] The reader is at all times ready to become a writer" (Benjamin 2008c, 359). In the same vein Benjamin (with reference to Tretjakov) "distinguishes the operating writer from the informing writer. His mission is not to report but to struggle; not to play the spectator but to intervene actively" (2008b, 81). And the techno-social transformation required in order to achieve this would be what Bertolt Brecht referred to as the 'functional transformation' [*Umfunktionierung*] of "the forms and instruments of production," which would be the equivalent of "freeing the means of production and serving the class struggle" (Benjamin 2008b, 85).

8 According to Meyrowitz, analysis of media in this perspective "also involves consideration of how political, economic, and social forces encourage the development of some media over others [as well as] why particular forms of various media evolved" (1998, 106).

This prognosticated transition points towards the contemporarily often hailed transformation of the passive masses of the audience (of cinema, literature, theatre etc.) into active, creative co-producers, that could – like in the case of Bard’s project – become part of the crowdsourced masses contributing to “cinema made by all” (Feldman 2010). The contemporary equivalence to Benjamin’s vision of the progressive media politics of Soviet Russia is in other words astoundingly akin to the participatory, co-creative, remix/convergence culture so often heralded the last decade, in which the audience or the consumer becomes the creative co-producer, the prosumer, and so on, all facilitated by the personal computer as a tool of individual (co-)creative freedom. In this sense, Bard’s project does, in Manovich’s terminology, quite perfectly fit the cultural logic of new media: especially on account of its multi-authorial and meta-media characteristics. Or perhaps, one could argue, it fits the logic of new media a bit too well?

Documentary Turn: from Documented Life to Documentation of the Medium

Bard’s project can be seen as a democratization of cultural production in quite a literal sense. But it is also – firstly and initially, one might say – conditioned by the kind of “semiotic democracy” John Fiske once pointed out (1987, 235). Bard’s project is dependent on different users’/co-producers’ individual interpretations of a cinematic work of art, which on the one hand has had a rather narrow or “fixed” reception history, but which on the other hand stands out as a quite enigmatic, “open” work. By this we are referring to the fact that in Bard’s project it is very much the user’s reinterpretation of each scene that comprises the film. If we take a look at the aesthetic approach that defines the work, it balances between experimental examination and what could be critically termed a *cyber-enthusiastic play* with Vertov’s 1929 constellation of documented life. That is, a collective homage to the work of a visionary director made possible through net-based collaboration.

It should also be noted that the type of exchange taking place in *Man With a Movie Camera – The Global Remake* is comparable with a juried exhibition: different contributors might be uploading the material, but ultimately it is Perry Bard who functions as the facilitator and author of the footage that is featured. When she first envisioned the project, the idea was to produce a multi-authorial version of the historical *city symphony* film genre that Vertov’s work is part of. Selected artists and filmmakers were to create their personal remakes of the film based in the cities they live in. Bard soon changed this to a concept, which

encompassed a broader and less control-oriented understanding of the net-based participatory film. Now she made it possible for everyone interested in the project to contribute with their own versions of the specific scenes from Vertov's original. This procedure of cutting up the film and outsourcing its separate sequences did confront Bard with a number of considerations and a difficult decision: "When I logged the movie, I got to know it very well and I got very attached to a lot of shots and scenes. So, every time I got an upload I had a very strong feeling about whether it made sense or not. I realised I had too many expectations. I had to let go in order to allow other people to participate. Letting go proved to be very difficult. This is where a participatory project can fail; if you control it too much it can't be interesting to others. I realised that what I had achieved with this, but also previous projects, is to create a platform for participation and then the participation has to be individual. There is a structure within which one can participate but if I were to control it beyond that, I would be asking for an exact remake" (Alifragkis and Bard 2008, 157). Following this, one could argue, that she almost does the direct opposite of Vertov – she activates all the cameras out there, instead of making the camera "activate" the world. This is partly due to the fact that *The Global Remake* is not primarily about the direct indexical relationship between documented reality and the camera, but rather about the relationship between men, women, and their cameras and the digital film culture facilitated through user-interfaces, coded algorithms, and so on.

Because what characterizes most of the new material is a formalistic affinity with the sequences that made up the original film and functions as a kind of prefigured template. Most of the contributors tend to repeat the thematic content of each clip with an updated version of the specific settings and a camera angle which mimics or comments Vertov's compositions (Feldman 2010). Tripod cameras are transformed into mobile phones; trolleys traversing the city are replaced with cars and so on. This places Bard's project halfway between the video-archive and the documentary film. Images that seemed like a modern day revelation in Vertov's frame of reference are now – to put it bluntly – translated into everyday recordings of contemporary life, often with crude, poorly-composed, or random snapshots as the result [Fig. 11]. This makes the experience comparable with Thomas Elsaesser description of traversing the YouTube database: a tightrope walk between epiphany and entropy (Elsaesser 2008, 30). In this case a question of spotting the inventive or exciting moment in the reinterpretations of Vertov's scenes, while enduring a majority of formulaic clips showcasing the visual stereotypes of mobile digital media.

In this sense, it is not without consequence – especially on the aesthetic level – that the aim of Bard’s art project seems less an attempt to forge a cinematic artwork in its own right, let alone a whole new visual language, than an attempt to orchestrate – or perhaps merely demonstrate? – the new social organization of the production of art under the banners of “remix,” “participation,” “social production,” “collaborative creativity,” and so on. This is, in fact, also recognized by Bard herself, when answering whether the remake will ever be screened alone, she replies that the “remake with the film looks like an experiment. The remake by itself looks like a very bad independent film. [...] People from the film world want all of the formal sophistication that Vertov put into his movie. That will never happen...” (Alifragkis and Bard 2008, 158). Instead, she insists that the project should be perceived – and judged – not as a film, but as an exploration of the digital community.

If Bard’s project – as suggested by Feldman – can be perceived as a realisation of Vertov’s plan for making cinema by the assistance of an army of kinoks, which was never realised by Vertov himself, but which on a technological level has now become much more feasible, it is at the same time a realisation that is not quite what Vertov might have expected. In Vertov’s view, this army of kinoks, who “would make, edit, distribute and exhibit film in a continuous stream” (Feldman 2010, 2), were certainly intended to be trained and skilled in the art of capturing reality on film, on par with himself, film editor and future wife Elisaveta Svilova and his younger brother and cameraman Michael Kaufman. The kinoks actually consisted of young, ambitious cameramen, editors, technicians, and animators. Vertov, Kaufman, and Svilova functioned as the organising counsel for this larger group, “the higher organ of the *kinoks*” (*visshii organ kinokov*), whose primary function was to act as the official spokespersons for the production policy of the cooperative. In a contemporary perspective, the organisation and articulation of the kinoks certainly has a militaristic ring, and Vertov himself also described the members as “an international movement that marched in step with the world proletarian revolution” (quoted by Drobashenko 1966, 81). In this context, this declaration is interesting, not so much because of how it was formulated, but more because of the global ambition bestowed upon the creation of this new documentary film language.⁹ Bard’s contemporary army of cameramen primarily equipped with various mobile gadgets, that technologically speaking makes it

9 Both Petric and Michelson calls attention to the fact that Vertov, Aleksei Gan, and Vladimir Mayakovsky were among the only soviet artists to explicitly express this cosmopolitan desire that were later to be deemed as treachery by the Communist Party.

possible for anyone to participate in creation of cinema, generally seem to be untrained/unskilled amateurs, apparently often university students in media production classes (“kinoks with a fixed curriculum”). This definitely does not sit well with the idea that digitally facilitated collaborative amateur production within remix culture so often presented especially in the mid-2000s, for instance Lev Manovich own suggestion that amateur production within remix culture often seems to “represents the most innovative cultural production done today” from his 2008 online version of *Software Takes Command* (2013); a claim that has now – wisely – been elicited from the official version of the book.

The positioning of the work between avant-garde and aesthetic sensibilities represented by the participatory and film technical aspects, respectively, seems crucial for understanding the media historical impact and the function of the remake. Considering that although Vertov’s movie – especially if you consult most of its paratext – seems preoccupied with the recording of life “as it is,” one should not ignore, nor underestimate the aesthetic cinematic dimensions of this movie. It is certainly no *unfiltered* decoding of reality; the celebratory aesthetics of *The Man with the Movie Camera* goes way beyond experimentation with decoding and revelation alone. This is evident in direct comparison with the remake; which is an affordance, Bard’s setup obviously facilitates quite well. What becomes clear is the degree to which the new, user-generated scenes are (1) less aesthetically challenging than those of Vertov (that is: less visually composed, less genuinely experimental, less innovative, and so on); and (2) in many ways, more preoccupied with establishing a technologically-dictated “aesthetics of recording reality” than actually happens to be the case with Vertov. This is mainly due to the frequent use of and explicit reference to mobile recording devices in combination with the just mentioned “sloppy” aesthetic, which – when adding to the mix the already dominating conventions concerning mobile media-recording – produces an unmistakable realism effect. This means that when looking at Bard’s remake, we come to realise, what we are actually looking at is a reality effect-driven reenactment of what now stands out as a documentary that is much more highly aestheticised than it pretends to be (as proclaimed in Vertov’s original opening manifesto) or is often made out to be. In the perspective of collaborative media-practice, it could be argued that while Vertov’s original shows us the consequences of the enchantment of film, Bard’s “contemporary kinoks” through their collective actions display the disenchantment of the very same medium. Two very different lessons that might be equally important to remember.

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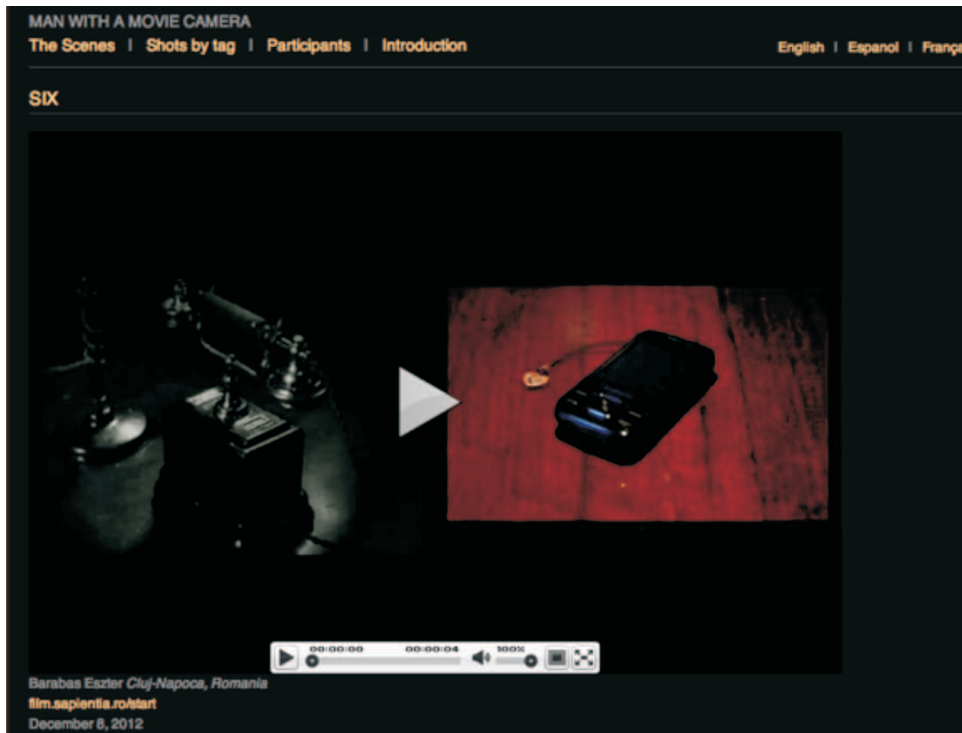
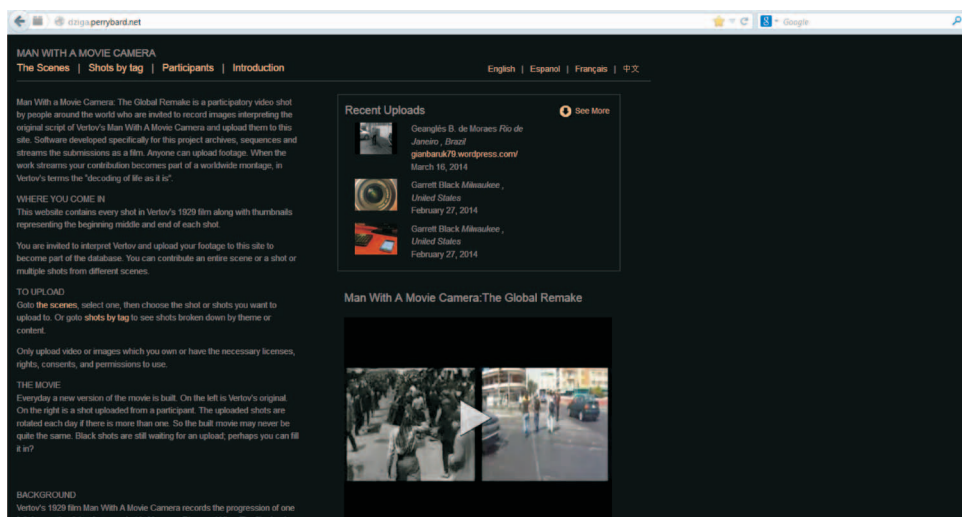
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List of Figures

Figures 1–2. Examples of the interface in Perry Bard's *Man With a Movie Camera: The Global Remake*.



Figures 3–4. Visual outtakes from the highly accelerated montage in the end sequence of Vertov's film.

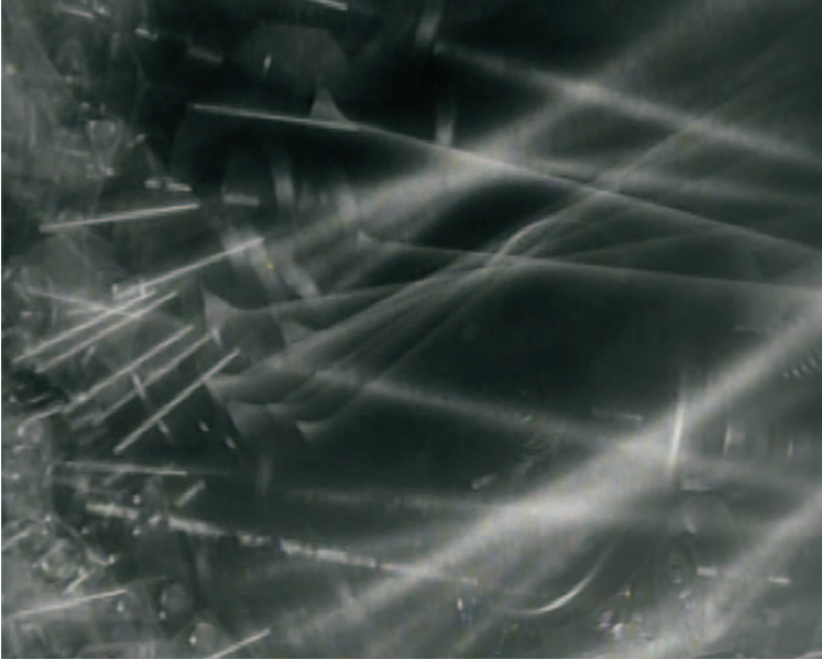


Figure 5. Example of the ubiquitous presence of mobile phone as camera in Bard's remake.



Figures 6–7. Vertov's brother and fellow *kinok* Mikhail Kaufman performing daring stunts simultaneously in front and behind the camera in the role of *The Man with the Movie Camera*.





Figures 8–9. The cover of Gilder’s book and the original film poster by the Stenberg brothers.

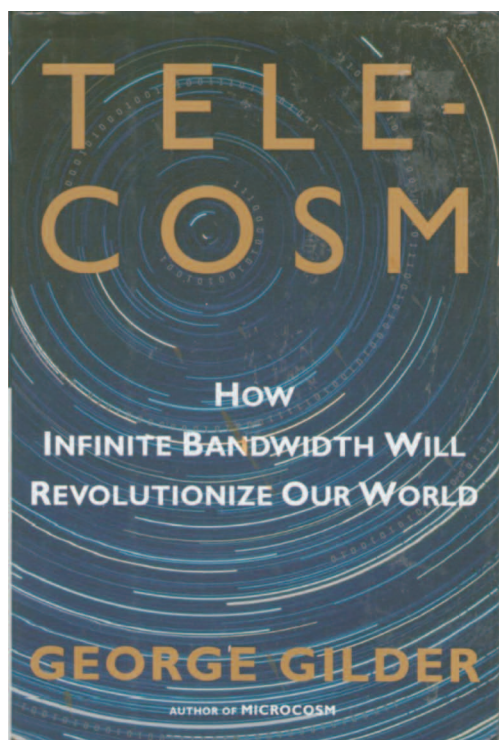


Figure 10. The iconic closing shot of Vertov's film that superimposes the human eye with the camera lens.

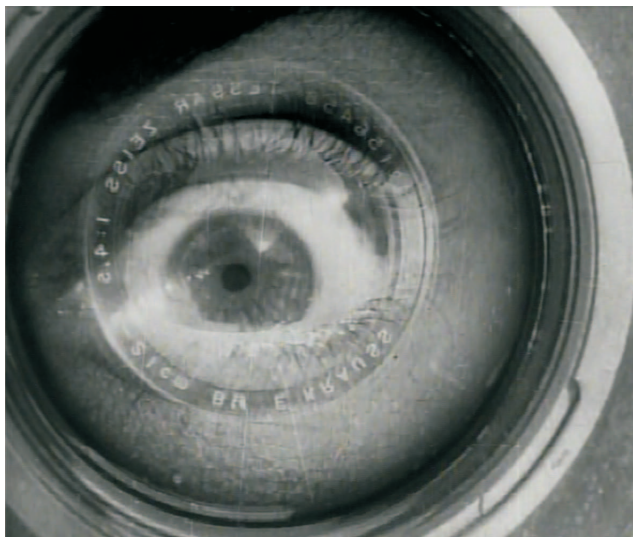


Figure 11. One example of the straightforward “image translations” that takes place in many of the uploaded videos, which comprises Bard’s remake.

