

CITY SYMPHONY AND *MAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA*

Of all the avant-garde filmmakers discussed in this book, Dziga Vertov was the most influenced by machinism, the belief that reality should be transformed using the machine as both tool and blueprint. During the 1920s in the Soviet Union, he was affiliated with the Left Front of the Arts as well as constructivism. These groups consisted of avant-garde artists, many of whom had belonged to the prerevolutionary generation of futurists, who formulated a new concept of art, one that befitted the supposedly egalitarian Communist society that was being built around them. They conceived of the artist as a worker, much like an engineer, who produced socially useful objects. Art should serve a practical purpose and aid in the construction of the new Communist state, they believed, and they therefore railed against "art for art's sake," which they associated with the old, bourgeois society that had been overthrown by the revolution. They also, to varying degrees, modeled art-making on industrial production, using modern materials and methods as well as aiming for efficiency and economy. The artist, they thought, ought to be like a factory worker who manufactures socially useful objects using the tools and principles of industrial production, and they designed and manufactured furniture, utensils, advertisements, and clothing.

These ideas had a profound influence on Vertov's theory and practice.¹ He believed passionately that film should be socially useful, and he located its

social mission in the revelation and organization of facts about reality rather than in fictional storytelling: “*Revolutionary cinema’s path of development has been found. It leads past the heads of film actors and beyond the studio roof, into life, into genuine reality, full of its own drama and detective plots.*”² In addition, he attempted to model filmmaking on industrial production, envisaging a time when a film studio would be a centralized “factory of facts” organized according to principles of efficiency and economy. In *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), the city symphony I will focus on in this chapter, we see Elizaveta Svilova, Vertov’s wife, carefully cataloging and storing footage in her editing room, and the film compares her and the cameraman’s labor to various forms of manual work in the service sector, factories, and heavy industry (fig. 5.1).

Vertov also exalted machines and their products, especially in his early writings, comparing them favorably to human beings. In his 1922 manifesto “We,” for example, he argues:

The machine makes us ashamed of man’s inability to control himself, but what are we to do if electricity’s unerring ways are more exciting to us than the disorderly haste of active men and the corrupting inertia of passive ones?

Saws dancing at a sawmill convey to us a joy more intimate and unintelligible than that on human dance floors.

For his inability to control his movements, WE temporarily exclude man as a subject for film.

Our path leads through the poetry of machines, from the bungling citizen to the perfect electric man. . . .

*The new man, free of unwieldiness and clumsiness, will have the light, precise movements of machines, and he will be the gratifying subject of our films.*³

Hence, we often find in Vertov’s films the mechanization of human beings as encountered in *Ballet mécanique*. In *Man with a Movie Camera*, there is a frenetic sequence that interconnects shots of various types of labor. Close-ups of film



Figure 5.1 Dziga Vertov, *Man with a Movie Camera*, 1929.

celluloid being edited are interspersed with shots of typing, writing, a sewing machine, and a newspaper conveyer belt. Typically, only the workers' hands are visible in these shots, moving swiftly and precisely, with occasional cuts to their faces as they stare intently at their work. Within this fast-paced, exuberant sequence, there is a short series of shots of a woman folding boxes on a wooden block. It begins with a close-up of a machine processing similar boxes (fig. 5.2) and is followed by a close-up of the woman's hands rapidly folding a box on the block and a shot of her face as she stares down at her work and throws the completed box over her shoulder onto a pile (figs. 5.3, 5.4). The film cuts back and forth between identical shots of the woman's hands and face about five or six times. We then return to the box-sorting machine followed by a final shot of the woman. Her movements are identical in each shot, much like the repetitious movements of a machine, and the cuts between her hands and face follow a regular, mechanical rhythm. At first, each shot of her hands lasts for roughly two seconds, as she folds the box, while the shots of her face last a single, third second. This pattern is repeated five or six times and its pace accelerated, thereby endowing the worker with the mechanical rhythm of the box-sorting machine with which she works.

To understand Vertov's dedication to machinism, one must bear in mind that he worked in a society captivated by the materialist analogy between human beings and machines and, more generally, the authority of the natural sciences. In the middle of the nineteenth century, a new conception of the human body as a motor—a machine that converts energy into work—had arisen, one in which the body was viewed as identical to machines and natural forces in the sense that all were now considered to be systems of production subject to the same objective and universal laws of energy conversion and conservation measurable by science.⁴ This so-called productivist vision of the identity of nature, machine, and human body had a profound impact on the organization of work in the latter half of the nineteenth century. It gave rise to the attempt by F.W. Taylor, Frank Gilbreth, and others to objectively measure and quantify labor power in the development of a science of work, the goal of which was to harmonize workers with machines and the industrial workplace to ensure the most



Figure 5.2 Dziga Vertov, *Man with a Movie Camera*, 1929.

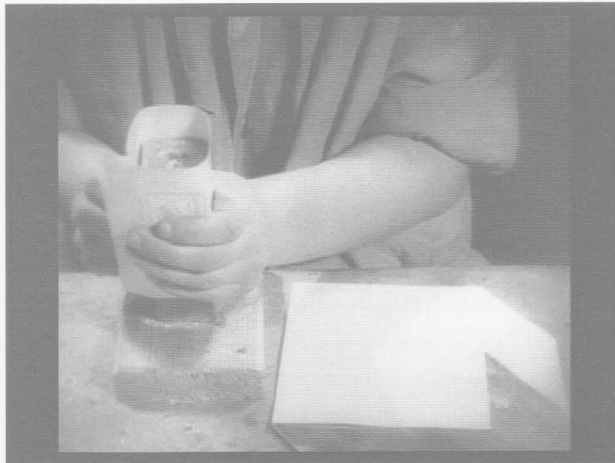


Figure 5.3 Dziga Vertov, *Man with a Movie Camera*, 1929.

efficient deployment of energy and the maximum productivity possible. And it resulted in vastly more efficient and productive working practices in the drive toward industrial modernization. By the 1920s it had become, in the words of the historian Anson Rabinbach:

the common coin of European industrial management and of the pro-Taylorist technocratic movements across the European political landscape. . . . On all points of the political spectrum “Taylorism and technocracy” were the watchwords of a three-pronged idealism: the elimination of economic and social crisis; the expansion of productivity through science; and the reenchantment of technology. The vision of society in which social conflict was eliminated in favor of technological and scientific imperatives could embrace liberal, socialist, authoritarian, and even communist and fascist solutions. Productivism, in short, was politically promiscuous.⁵

Promiscuous it was. Productivism found fertile ground among Russian and other Eastern European revolutionaries and industrial reformers who desired to liberate their peoples from widespread poverty, primitive and often barbaric social conditions, and backward work practices. It gave rise after the October Revolution—although not without debate and controversy—to the Soviet cult of Ford and the experimentation with and implementation of various Taylorist work practices and forms of scientific management in an effort to industrialize rapidly.⁶ Furthermore, its utopian dimension appealed strongly to Russian and Marxist visionaries, especially (in the words of Rabinbach) its “reenchantment of technology,” the belief that the integration of human beings and technology in the name of the expansion of production would bring about the perfection and ultimate salvation of humankind.

As the historian Richard Stites has argued, this enchantment with technology probably found its most extreme expression in the “cult of the machine” of figures such as poet Alexei Gastev.⁷ In his thirst for social and industrial modernization, Gastev eagerly embraced and extended Taylorism and the analogy

between human being and machine. For him, technology would not only emancipate human beings; it would also literally transform them into “new people,” more perfect because more machine-like. While working, these new people would be able to coordinate and control their movements with the precision and efficiency of a machine, ensuring maximum productivity and eliminating waste of time and energy. Their daily lives would be governed by self-discipline and the perpetual quest for the most expedient and efficient use of their time. Gastev’s popular poetry from the 1910s is particularly well known for the way it envisages a mechanical paradise in which human being and machine are perfectly synthesized in their grand dominion over nature, and human beings with “nerves of steel” and “muscles like iron rails” have become perfectly harmonized to the movement and tempo of machines. Nor was this a marginal artistic vision. Following the Revolution, Gastev founded the Central Institute of Labor (1920), which received the support of Lenin and other leaders and was given the task of coordinating Soviet research on labor rationalization.⁸ The institute was devoted to the scientific study of work and to training a cadre of advanced workers how to perfectly master both a series of core movements and complex machinery while eliminating superfluous expenditures of energy. Such workers would be knowledgeable about advanced technology and adept at thinking and moving in efficient, disciplined, and precise ways, their bodies trained to harmonize with factory machines. Gastev edited several major industrial journals, held various government positions, and was one of the leading Soviet popularizers of Taylorism.

This same desire to transform human beings into “new people,” more perfect because more machine-like, can be found in Vertov’s theory and practice. It is clearly evident in the following passage from “We”: “In revealing the machine’s soul, in causing the worker to love his workbench, the peasant his tractor, the engineer his engine—we introduce creative joy into all mechanical labor, we bring people into closer kinship with machines, we foster new people.”⁹ In another text, Vertov writes of being able to “create a man more perfect than Adam” using the machines of cinema, and, as we have seen, films such as *Man with a Movie Camera* contain sequences in which humans are mechanized.¹⁰

For these reasons, commentators have typically concluded that Vertov was an unambiguous proponent of machinism, employing the machine as the model for both his films and the new Soviet society depicted in them. Film critic Gilberto Perez summarizes this standard view eloquently and concisely: “[Vertov’s] *Man with a Movie Camera* pictures the city as a vast machine seen by the omnipresent seeing machine that is the camera. The structure of Vertov’s films, their aggregate space pieced together in the cutting room out of all the manifold things the mechanical eye can see, suggests the constructions of the engineer so prized in [the] new Soviet society.”¹¹

Yet, unsurprisingly given what we have discovered throughout this book, Vertov’s stance toward machinism was more complicated than it might at first appear. To start with, the focus of commentators on the machine in Vertov’s work has obscured the influence of other models as he was making *Man with a Movie Camera* in the late 1920s, including one that is often thought of as antithetical to the machine, namely, the organism.¹² *Man with a Movie Camera* is structured according to the daily cycle of a complex living organism such as a human being—waking, work, and relaxation—a structure established in earlier city films like Walter Ruttmann’s *Berlin, Symphony of a Great City* (1927). After the prologue in which an audience arrives to watch a film in a movie theater, we see, first, a city’s empty streets, still machines, closed shops, and sleeping people, including some who are homeless. Gradually, its inhabitants, including the cameramen, get up and go to work; streets are cleaned, transport systems start up, and machines begin operating. People are shown engaged in a wide variety of daily activities, from getting married and divorced to operating machines and manufacturing objects. Finally, the workday ends and leisure begins. Citizens congregate on beaches, exercise, and enjoy forms of entertainment such as chess and, of course, watching a film, which turns out to be *Man with a Movie Camera* itself, in the movie theater shown in the prologue, to which we return at the film’s end.

Moreover, the model for the new Communist society depicted in the film is an organism, not a machine. As Annette Michelson has argued:

This film . . . joins the human life cycle with the cycles of work and leisure of a city from dawn to dusk within the spectrum of industrial production. That production includes filmmaking . . . mining, steel production, communications, postal service, construction, hydro-electric power installation, and the textile industry in a seamless, organic continuum. . . . The full range of analogical and metaphorical readings thereby generated signify a general and organic unity.¹³

By “organic unity” and “organic continuum,” Michelson means that Vertov consistently depicts the different parts of Communist society as interdependent and interconnected into a whole by linking them through “strategies of visual analogy and rhyme, rhythmic patterning, parallel editing, superimposition, accelerated and decelerated motion, camera movement—in short, the use of every optical device and filming strategy then available to film technology.”¹⁴ Machines, too, can be described as wholes with interconnected, interdependent parts. However, as Noël Carroll has pointed out, “in political philosophy, the organic society is one in which the community is integrated by a common goal,” and it is precisely goals that machines, because they are automatic and unthinking, are thought to lack.¹⁵ By linking otherwise separate human beings and activities, *Man with a Movie Camera* attempts to show Soviet citizens that they are united in the common goal of building the new Communist society, that their actions have a purpose, a meaning, that they are part of a teleological, organic whole. An obvious example is the exhilarating sequence in which filmmaking and industrial production are connected through rapid editing and graphic matches. After a sequence of cameramen filming a dam, several rapidly spinning machine parts are shown, and these are intercut with a close-up of a hand cranking a movie camera, the fast, circular motion of the hand crank rhyming with that of the rotating machines (fig. 5.5, 5.6). Following a shot of smoke pouring from a vent, a shot of the cameraman with his tripod slung over his shoulder is rapidly intercut with shots first of factory chimneys and then small, spinning machine parts (figs. 5.7–5.9), thereby creating a flicker effect in which the cameraman



Figure 5.7 Dziga Vertov, *Man with a Movie Camera*, 1929.



Figure 5.8 Dziga Vertov, *Man with a Movie Camera*, 1929.

appears to be superimposed over the other shots. In this sequence, as in many others in the film, it is the rhythm of the editing that creates the impression that the activities it depicts are not just interconnected but goal-oriented. For as it progresses, the editing speeds up until the sequence climaxes in a burst of shots that are so short as to be virtually indistinguishable.

The film as a whole, as Vertov scholar Vlada Petrić has shown in his meticulous analysis, employs a unique style of editing he refers to as “disruptive-associative montage” to connect the various people and activities it represents:

A sequence establishes its initial topic and develops its full potential through an appropriate editing pace until a seemingly incongruous shot (announcing a new topic) is intercut, foreshadowing another theme that, although disconcerting at first glance, serves as a dialectical commentary on the previously recorded event. The metaphorical linkage between the two disparate topics occurs through an associative process that takes place in the viewer’s mind.¹⁶

This style of editing creates some complex sequences in which Vertov intercuts between several different activities rather than moving from one to the next in a linear fashion. In the sequences depicting marriage, divorce, death, and birth, for example, he cuts back and forth between these four themes rather than presenting them sequentially, and also includes shots of a traffic signal, the camera, and trams. As always, there are rhymes between the shots that suggest links between them, such as the physical similarity between a woman getting divorced who hides her face with her arm and another weeping over the death of a loved one, her head cradled in her arm in grief (figs. 5.10, 5.11). As Vertov himself puts it in his article on the film: “Each item or each factor is a separate little document. The documents have been joined with one another so that, on the one hand, the film would consist only of those linkages between signifying pieces that coincide with the visual linkages and so that, on the other hand, these linkages would not require intertitles; the final sum of all these linkages represents, therefore, an organic whole.”¹⁷ By way of these visual linkages, Vertov emphasizes



Figure 5.10 Dziga Vertov, *Man with a Movie Camera*, 1929.



Figure 5.11 Dziga Vertov, *Man with a Movie Camera*, 1929.

the essential oneness of the new Communist society, the fact that every human activity, whether it be mining, steel production, or filmmaking, is part of a larger organic whole. In this way, according to Michelson, Vertov's films attempt to instill in his Soviet viewers the belief that they are all interdependent and equal owners of the means of production, "the euphoric and intensified sense of a shared end: the supercession of private property in the young socialist state under construction."¹⁸

Furthermore, in addition to mechanizing human beings, Vertov just as often gives machines human attributes. There is a sequence toward the end of *Man with a Movie Camera* in which the movie camera, having enjoyed a starring role throughout the film, performs an encore (fig. 5.12). Emerging on its own onto a bare stage, it proceeds to walk about on its tripod, carefully displaying its parts to the appreciative audience within the film and almost bowing in the process. The people in the audience smile with delight, and in doing so echo the smiles of children from an earlier sequence who similarly delighted in the performance of a magician. Indeed, if we had to choose a human being whom the camera most clearly resembles at this moment, it would be the magician from the earlier sequence because of the cinematic magic trick (stop-motion) that enables it to move autonomously.

By conferring human attributes on his camera in this sequence, Vertov is replicating in his film practice a major rhetorical tendency of his film theory. He often ascribes to the camera predicates, primarily perceptual predicates, normally reserved for human beings and other living creatures. As the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein argued, "Only of a living human being and what resembles (behaves like) a living human being can one say: it has sensations; it sees; is blind; hears; is deaf; is conscious or unconscious."¹⁹ But in his film theory, Vertov grants the camera the ability to do at least one of these things: to see. Here is a typical example, a kind of free indirect speech on behalf of the camera: "I am kino-eye, I am a mechanical eye. I, a machine, show you the world as only I can see it."²⁰ Vertov's theoretical writings are full of similar passages in which he bestows on the camera the power of sight and the capacity to show and reveal things to the film spectator. In these passages, it is as if Vertov's camera were alive, as if it

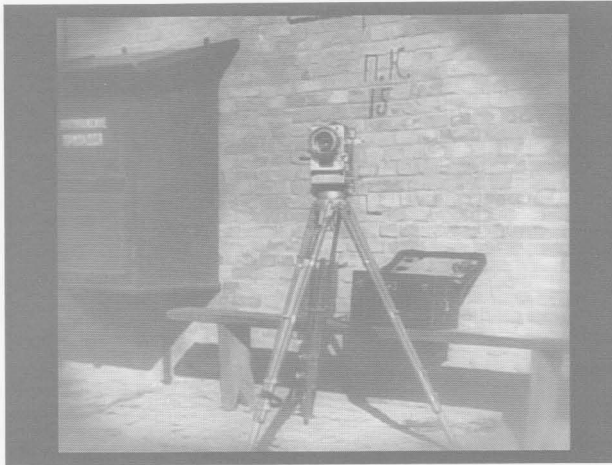


Figure 5.12 Dziga Vertov, *Man with a Movie Camera*, 1929.



were an agent of some kind with intentionality, a will, just as it appears to be when it emerges onto the stage. Nor is this scene the only example in the film. Although its title is *Man with a Movie Camera* and “the man,” Boris Kauffman (Vertov’s brother), is often shown operating the camera, sometimes it is framed in such a way as to exclude him and to make it appear that the camera is acting independently. For example, during the sequence in which a couple registers to get married, there are four shots of the camera perched on a rooftop overlooking the city (fig. 5.13). There is no sign of the operator, yet it swivels on its tripod as if scanning the horizon, and as the couple leaves it abruptly rotates almost 80 degrees, as if it has just noticed something new.

One way of understanding this anthropomorphization of the camera is to view it as an example of what Walter Benjamin called the “mimetic faculty,” the “gift of seeing resemblances.” Benjamin suggested that a mimetic faculty was responsible for the “magical correspondences and analogies that were familiar to ancient peoples” and that it continues to find “its school” in modernity in the play of children, who often imaginatively attribute human capacities and characteristics to nonhuman objects, especially those that bear a physical resemblance to humans such as dolls.²¹ Vertov’s anthropomorphized camera can perhaps be understood as a playful analogy based on morphological similarities between the camera and human beings. Certainly, *Man with a Movie Camera* repeatedly and deliberately underscores such resemblances. The famous shot of the human eye superimposed on the camera lens highlights the affinities of shape and function between the two (fig. 5.14), and the sequence already described in which the camera walks around on the stage exploits the isomorphism between the human form and the camera. Moreover, the audience in this sequence, shown smiling and laughing at the camera’s movements, is not deceived by the “illusion” that the camera can move around on its own like a human being. The audience members do not take it literally. Rather, they smile and laugh as if it were a playful joke, an amusing conceit, which is a good indication that we—Vertov’s viewers and readers—should take it in the same way.

Also, it is possible to locate in Vertov’s film theory a plausible rationale for this analogy:



Figure 5.13 Dziga Vertov, *Man with a Movie Camera*, 1929.

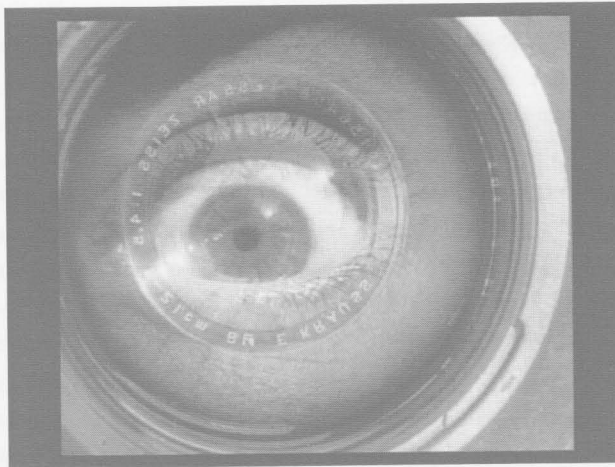


Figure 5.14 Dziga Vertov, *Man with a Movie Camera*, 1929.

The mechanical eye, the camera, rejecting the human eye as crib sheet, gropes its way through the chaos of visual events, letting itself be drawn or repelled by movement, probing, as it goes, the path of its own movement. It experiments, distending time, dissecting movement, or, in contrary fashion, absorbing time within itself, swallowing years, thus schematizing processes of long duration inaccessible to the normal eye.²²

This passage is typical of Vertov's writings in its argument that the movie camera is much more powerful than the human eye because it can show and reveal to human beings what the eye cannot see, and it is this reverence for the camera, expressed time and again in Vertov's film theory, that perhaps explains his anthropomorphization of it. By asking us to entertain the imaginative conceit that the camera can see, Vertov is perhaps suggesting that its power is so great that it is as if it were an independent agent of sight, like a human being. Vertov is in effect asking us to join him in his feeling of awe and reverence for the power of the camera as a machine, and he is trying to elicit in us a sense of almost childlike wonder and delight at the magnitude and potential of this power.

This interpretation of the camera eye, however, leaves certain questions unanswered. To start with—as is obvious from Vertov's argument that the movie camera is a much more powerful instrument of sight than the human eye—however important morphological similarities between human beings and the camera might be for Vertov, what is far more important for him, and what he points to again and again in his film theory, is the enormous difference between the two. For him, an immense gulf separates them, and it is this gulf that is at the center of his film theory rather than any morphological similarities. "The kino-eye lives and moves in time and space; it gathers and records impressions in a manner wholly different from that of the human eye. The position of our bodies while observing or our perception of a certain number of features of a visual phenomenon in a given instant are by no means obligatory limitations for the camera which, since it is perfected, perceives more and better."²³ The human eye, according to Vertov, is weak, flawed, and primitive in contrast to the

camera, and he constantly emphasizes its “imperfections” and “shortsightedness” in comparison to the infinite perfectibility of the camera, which he continually celebrates and exalts. “The weakness of the human eye is manifest,” he declares. “We cannot improve the making of our eyes, but we can endlessly perfect the camera.”²⁴ Thus, beneath the morphological parallels that Vertov draws in his film practice between camera and human eye lies a fundamental dissimilarity between the two that takes center stage in his film theory. At the very least, therefore, it seems strange that Vertov would extend human attributes to his camera because, for him, the camera and human beings are fundamentally dissimilar; the camera is much more powerful than the human eye.

Even stranger is the fact that Vertov would ask us to entertain the idea that the camera can see in the first place, that he would wish to place us in the “primitive” position of a child engaged in the mimetic game of imaginatively extending human capacities to nonhuman objects. Vertov advocated the “unstaged” film of fact as the most socially useful way of using the cinema, and his practice is usually seen as profoundly “anti-illusionist,” dedicated to shattering myths and revealing truths about reality. This includes imperfections in the new Communist society—hence the shots of homeless people and drunkenness in *Man with a Movie Camera* and the acknowledgment of continuing class stratification in the scene of bourgeois women having their bags carried by servants. Hence, too, the honesty about the illusory power of film as a medium through the arrest of motion in the sequence of the bourgeois women in a horse-drawn cab and the reflexive gesture of showing Svilova at the editing table working on the very film we are watching. Such anti-illusionist and reflexive strategies have led commentators such as Michelson to argue that Vertov’s project aspires to enlighten its viewers, to “render insistently concrete . . . that philosophical phantasm of the reflexive consciousness, the eye seeing, apprehending itself through its constitution of the world’s visibility.”²⁵ *Man with a Movie Camera*, she argues, is a film in which Vertov transforms his camera “from a Magician into an Epistemologist,” in which he invites “the camera to come of age,” to grow up and leave childish tricks and games behind.²⁶ If this is true, however, why would Vertov *also* be asking us to regress, to engage in the childlike game of extending human capacities to the very “tool of Enlightenment” itself, the film camera? Just as, for Marx,

the “social character of men’s labor” is displaced onto the commodity, thereby becoming disguised as a magical property of the commodity itself, the camera in Vertov’s theory and practice is fetishized. It is an object of reverence, far more powerful than we are, as if enchanted, as if possessed of a power independent of us. It is as though the camera were not our creation, our tool.

All of this is a roundabout way of saying that there is more to Vertov’s camera–eye analogy than meets the eye. It is premised more on alterity than resemblance, and it seems to violate the Enlightenment trajectory “from Magician to Epistemologist” of Vertov’s project by asking us to regress, to view the camera as something that is not subject, like a tool or instrument, to the control and manipulation of human beings, but that can see on its own, much like a human being, yet in a way far superior. Why this “surfacing of ‘the primitive’ within modernity,” to use anthropologist Michael Taussig’s words?²⁷

We have seen that, like Gastev and other Soviet visionaries, Vertov in his early writings envisaged the transformation of human beings into “new people,” more perfect because more machine-like. Vertov’s conception of this transformation was not as excessive or obsessive as Gastev’s, however, although it probably owed a lot to him. It lacks, for example, the exploitative and dehumanizing dimensions of Gastev’s endorsement of Taylorism. Gastev argued that mechanization, standardization, and the division of labor in modern industry would necessarily eliminate creativity from work, resulting in a uniform, mechanized proletariat with a new psychology. These features of industrial production, he wrote, “will impart to proletarian psychology a striking anonymity, permitting the classification of an individual proletarian unit as A, B, C, or 325, 0’075, O, and so on.”²⁸ Gastev was a controversial figure in the 1920s and was criticized by those who rejected Taylorism as exploitative, as well as those who argued that, as a product of capitalism, Taylorism should only be critically and selectively appropriated. Vertov, by contrast, retained a deep respect for the “organic” nature of human life, which is apparent in the organic structure of *Man with a Movie Camera* as well as the film’s attempt to show Soviet citizens that they are interdependent, interconnected, and united in the goal of building the new Communist society.

Furthermore, if we look carefully at what Vertov says about the relationship between machines and humans as well as the way he represents this relationship on screen, we can see that he does not simply advocate the mechanization of human beings. Instead, his vision is an egalitarian one of machine and human being working in harmony, a harmony created by humans taking on attributes of machines such as their rhythms and efficient movements, and the machine being endowed with human qualities in order to render it appealing rather than alienating to its human operators. It is worthwhile to quote the relevant passage from “We” again: “In revealing the machine’s *soul*, in causing the worker to love his workbench, the peasant his tractor, the engineer his engine—we introduce creative joy into all mechanical labor, we bring people into closer kinship with machines, we foster new people.”²⁹ Here, rather than mechanizing human beings, Vertov recommends humanizing machines by giving them a “soul,” and the result, he believes, will be a “closer kinship” between the two in which the worker comes to “love” his machine. Nor was Vertov alone in thinking this. As the art historian Christina Kiaer has shown, Vertov’s fellow constructivists envisaged the replacement of capitalist commodity culture, in which objects are enslaved by their owners, with “something far more peculiar and psychologically powerful: the material object as an active, almost animate participant in social life.”³⁰ Such socially useful objects were conceived of as “comrades” who play a role equal to that of humans in the construction of the new Communist society. Vertov extended this egalitarian, “animistic” approach to machines, and we can see this in *Man with a Movie Camera* in those scenes in which machines are given human attributes, such as when the camera walks around on the stage.

Another example occurs during the sequence of people awakening in the morning, in which we see a young woman during various stages of sleeping, washing, dressing, and preparing for the day ahead. At one point, a close-up shows her face as she towels it dry (fig. 5.15). As her eyes emerge from behind the towel to stare directly into the camera, we cut to what is presumably a point-of-view shot from her position of the blinds in her room, which are still shut. The flaps of the blinds open automatically and we cut to an extreme close-up of a camera lens adjusting its focus and moving in and out of the body of the camera (fig. 5.16). This is followed by another point-of-view shot from



Figure 5.15 Dziga Vertov, *Man with a Movie Camera*, 1929.



Figure 5.16 Dziga Vertov, *Man with a Movie Camera*, 1929.

the camera's position of a bank of flowers moving in and out of focus, thus rhyming with the movement of the lens. These two shots are repeated, and then we cut back to a shot of the blinds in the young woman's room, this time as they are slowly closing. There then follow several rapid cuts between the woman's blinking eyes and the flaps of the blinds closing and opening, cuts that produce a flicker effect, and finally the sequence ends on another close-up of the camera lens, this time with its aperture opening and closing. This sequence effectively uses intercutting and a series of graphic matches between movements and objects within shots to produce an extended analogy between camera and human eye. This analogy is predicated on the physical similarity of eye and lens as instruments that focus and admit light; and, in its evocation of the act of flexing and exercising in the early morning, it suggests a common physical activity shared by both human being and machine: preparing for a purposeful, active day ahead.

Machines are also aestheticized in order to make them attractive to humans. A typical example is that of the multiple, static shots of trams taken from street level that appear intermittently throughout the film (figs. 5.17, 5.18). In these, the trams tend to slide into and out of the frame unexpectedly, either from behind the camera or across its path. These highly geometric shots, which frame the street from its center, are usually divided in half by a street lamp that runs the length of the middle of the frame from top to bottom. Often, as a tram is moving out of the depth of the frame toward the camera, another will suddenly cross its path from left to right, momentarily obscuring it. Or, as a tram is moving from right to left across the frame, another will emerge from behind the camera and glide toward the first without slowing or stopping. In later shots of the trams, Vertov introduces superimposition and multiplies their number in the frame. With this technique, the trams now seem to glide effortlessly past and through each other, as if they have become ethereal, semitransparent, weightless objects. Through frame composition, camera placement, and superimposition, these shots foreground the beauty of the form and motion of the trams independently of the quotidian, practical purposes that they serve for human beings, presenting them to spectator-workers as not simply useful machines but as beautiful objects in their own right.



Figure 5.17 Dziga Vertov, *Man with a Movie Camera*, 1929.



Figure 5.18 Dziga Vertov, *Man with a Movie Camera*, 1929.

Finally, if we look closely at the sequences in which human beings are endowed with mechanical qualities of rhythm and movement, such as the matchbox scene, we can see that they differ considerably from their counterparts in *Ballet mécanique*. In that film, the faces and bodies of humans (Kiki, the washerwoman) are robbed of psychological depth and turned into plastic objects through rhythmical editing and repetition. But in the matchbox scene, though the woman's bodily movements are clearly endowed with the rhythm of the machines she works with, Vertov is careful to show her smiling face while she talks to someone off-screen (fig. 5.19). Her face is not, in other words, dehumanized by being robbed of its psychological depth or turned into a plastic object, and the same is largely true for the film as a whole, in which, as with the cameraman, Vertov will show the human being working *with* the machine rather than becoming one, as in *Ballet mécanique*.

Thus, even in the case of Vertov, who of all the filmmakers discussed in this book most eagerly welcomed modernization and the forces of mechanization and industrialism it unleashed, we find a complicated stance toward modernity. Eschewing the unequivocal embrace of these forces typically ascribed to avant-gardists, Vertov recognized that their acceptance by the Soviet citizens for whom he made his films would not occur if they were perceived as sweeping away the human and the organic. However much enthusiasm he might have had for the utopian vision of a new, mechanized populace and society that was prevalent in the avant-garde circles around him, and however superior to humans he believed machines such as the movie camera to be, he tempered this vision by inserting it within a humanized aesthetic and theoretical framework in which machines, the very emblem of modernity, are anthropomorphized and aestheticized to make them appealing to their human operators, much in the same way a child "primitively" attributes human capacities and characteristics to nonhuman objects. And it works, at least in *Man with a Movie Camera*. Does not the amused delight that we witness on the faces of the audience (fig. 5.20) watching the camera move around onstage perfectly manifest "the creative joy" of which Vertov speaks in his early pronouncement from "We," indicating that this audience "loves" this machine and feels a "kinship" with it?