

Russian Film Archives and Roy Batty's Syndrome: On the Three Programming Criteria for 'Ver sin Vertov'

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ABSTRACT

On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the death of Dziga Vertov, in 2005–06 La Casa Encendida in Madrid programmed "Ver sin Vertov", a retrospective season on non-fiction film in Russia and the USSR since Vertov's death until the present time. In this essay the film programmer reflects on the three programming criteria for that season. Firstly, he was interested in applying a negative methodology on the history of Russian and Soviet cinema, as it had previously been suggested by Naum Kleijman and used in the programme "Lignes d'ombre" that took place at the Locarno Festival in 2000. Secondly, the programme aimed to reflect the need to physically locate the experience of the spectator, conceiving of the screening as a film-event. And thirdly, the programme sought to foreground the questions and paradoxes presented by the works themselves, taking them as models or arguments for the programme itself. Taking as a point of departure the particular circumstances of Vertov's death – 37 years after the October Revolution; 37 years before the fall of the USSR in 1991 – this programme performed a historical and biographical reading of Dziga Vertov's *Theory of the Cinematographic Interval*, and was an invitation to understand programming as an exercise in montage.

KEYWORDS

Dziga Vertov, Russia, Soviet Union, non-fiction, negative methodology, film-event, place, space.

1 On the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Dziga Vertov, the 2004 edition of the Giornate del Cinema Muto de Pordenone, Italy programmed the most exhaustive retrospective ever made of the Soviet film-maker. Accompanied by the publication of a volume of texts by Vertov (*Lines of Resistance*, ed. Yuri Tsivian, 2004), the programme literally presented the complete man with the movie camera, so to speak; undoubtedly, it was one of the most remarkable projects attempting to map Soviet cinema since the fall of the USSR in 1991.

By way of contrast the programme ‘Ver sin Vertov’ (‘To See Without Vertov’) that I programmed for La Casa Encendida, Madrid from 9 October 2004 to 5 January 2005 on the occasion of the same anniversary, didn’t contain a single film by the Soviet film-maker. The programme looked forward from the same standpoint – Vertov’s death in 1954 – but instead of retrospectively reconstructing his legacy, it attempted to reflect his absence in Soviet and Russian film-making throughout the second half of the twentieth century. The void left by Vertov, also reflected in the title of the retrospective, shed light on the orphanhood from which, I believe, one always programmes: hoisting the paradox of *seeing without seeing*, the film season claimed that disorientation, blindness and silence can often be productive experiences from where to programme, and vindicated the pleasure of drifting or getting lost in a filmic territory not yet parcelled up or systematically organised by history. It aimed to make evident that one does not programme because one knows, but because one wants to know. One could say that, in its most honest dimension, each film programme reveals a trail – that of the programmer’s filmic family tree.

Applying a certain negative methodology, ‘Ver sin Vertov’ took as a point of departure Patricia Zimmerman’s enigmatic hypothesis of Vertov’s non-influence. Let’s recall her argument here: following the 1990 Robert Flaherty Film

Seminar, held in Riga, Latvia under the title ‘Vertov and Flaherty’s Legacy in Soviet and American Documentary Film’, Zimmerman notes Vertov’s paradoxical absence in Soviet documentary film-making from the 1950s onwards, and most particularly during Mikhail Gorbachev’s Perestroika (1985–91). Referring to the academics and film-makers who had attended the seminar, Zimmerman wrote: ‘The Soviet [participants] continually evoked Flaherty’s legacy as one of the motors of the new documentary in the USSR. (...) We have discovered that our Soviet colleagues are influenced by Flaherty, whereas we, Americans, are fascinated by Dziga Vertov.’ (ZIMMERMAN, 1992: 5) Putting aside any clarifications that Zimmerman’s argument might call for, her hypothesis of the non-influence of Vertov figured as one of the fascinating mysteries that prompted the programme ‘Ver sin Vertov’. In fact, the programme gauged the lack of Vertov’s influence as a defining characteristic of Russian and Soviet film, considered its own aesthetic density and value, recognisable and reiterated over time – that is, as an incarnated and visible sign of absence.

2 I believe it was Naum Klejman, Director of the Film Museum in Moscow, from whom I first heard of the need apply a negative methodology to reconstruct the history of twentieth-century Russian film. The visitor to the Russian film archives, he implied, should consider on an equal basis the films that were actually made and those that were never shot due to a range of reasons, mostly of an ideological nature. He or she should take stock of what films said and what they left unsaid. And always have in mind the films that were never taken out of their cans, as well as those whose first cuts remained intact (in spite of having been released in re-edited versions) and which had perhaps been awaiting a change of context, or perhaps a political swing that altered the criteria of the censors. The General Director of Gosfilmofond (Russian Cinematographic Archive), Vladimir Dmitriev, explains that ‘even if it may seem paradoxical, most prohibited

films in the USSR were not destroyed. Not even those that had been fiercely criticised. (...) An interesting phenomenon was at play, linked to our national psychology and perhaps also to the particular nature of our film-makers. They were all aware that the situation could change any given day. And so just in case, one had to conserve everything.' (EISENSCHITZ, 2000: 188).

It is not surprising then that Kleijman was one of the people behind the first project that, to my knowledge, dared to manifestly propose a journey through Soviet Russian cinema based on absence¹: the 2000 Locarno Festival, then directed by Marco Müller, reconstructed the territory of the unsaid, censored, silenced or mutilated in Soviet Russian cinema in the period 1926–68. Curated by Bernard Eisenschitz, the ensuing retrospective, 'Lignes d'ombre: Une autre histoire du cinéma soviétique' ('Shadow Lines: Another History of Soviet Cinema'), not only discovered non-canonical film-makers such as Vladimir Vengerov or Mikhail Schweitser – Eisenstein's first pupils at the Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography (VGIK) – but also shed a new light on the ones that already occupied a central position in the Soviet pantheon. In contrast to the stereotypes that had casted a stereotypical image of Soviet Russian cinema, organised according to historical and political periods, *Lignes d'ombre* took down the *trompe l'oeils* and painted backdrops of traditional historiography and, behind the scenographic machinery, opened the doors to the immensity of an unreachable horizon.

3 Anyone who had methodically followed the retrospective in Locarno would have easily reached two conclusions. The first one, can be summed up

1. In Russian cinema there are notable examples of unexistent films (and thus invisible films), which nevertheless have had a ghostly presence, even more significant than that of other classical films that are regularly screened. For instance, in 2012 we have celebrated the 75th anniversary of a fundamental film, which was however only ever seen by its director and censors. A film that, judging from the conclusions of the researchers, no one will ever see again. I am referring to *Bezhin Meadow* (*Bezhin Lug*,

borrowing Nikolái Berdiayev's words, according to whom, also in the cinema, 'Russians ignore the pleasure of form'. [please give a source] With the redefinition of its borders brought forth in 'Lignes d'ombres', Russian cinema seemed to go beyond the controllable limits of knowledge, becoming a veritable filmic atopia. In the last instance, the imaginary geography of the filmic territory – expansive and undefinable – could only be compared to the real territory, that is, to the mythical, unending Russian space: a formless cinematographic *prostor*, or horizonless space. To come back from that non-space, symbolically represented by the Gosfilmofond archives – the largest film collection in the world, containing over 60,000 titles – produces an agonistic anxiety that we could denominate 'syndrome of Roy Batty', after the replicant from *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982), veritable astonished spectator who claimed to 'have seen things you people wouldn't believe'. And he fairly died evoking the list of such incomparable visions: 'I've seen things you people wouldn't believe. Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I watched c-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhäuser Gate.' Without a doubt, Roy Batty's syndrome threatens anyone who dares to penetrate the galleries of Gosfilmofond.

The second of the conclusions of *Lignes d'ombre* ensues from such atopian immensity: more than in any other cinematography, or at least in a way more palpable than in any other, [could we cut this out? It doesn't seem to work in this sentence and it is repeated more or less below] each screening laid bare the geographic and spatial dimension that is co-substantial to any act of not only making, but also viewing films. Perhaps due

Sergei Eisenstein, 1937). The film was harshly criticised by the Soviet authorities, in particular by Boris Shumyatsky, director of the GUFK, who considered that instead of being based on the class struggle, the film was based on the battle between natural forces, in the battle between 'Good and Evil'. The film was never shown and its negative and copies were destroyed during the II World War. Based on this model, it doesn't seem unreasonable to imagine a big film retrospective without any films to screen.

to the impossibility of inhabiting this space for real, due to the real infinity of the filmic Russian *prostor*, or space, each screening defined a place, provided a provisional shelter, a fragile territory rescued from immensity: for the duration of the screening, each session made real the space of the spectator, held the power to create a home— just as each of the hills from which nomads stop to watch and, for an instant, found a place. Only the absolute atopia of Russian cinema could make so strikingly palpable the topographic experience that each screening signifies. Alongside Klejman's negative method, this is the second programming criteria that I extracted from 'Lignes d'ombre'.

4 In his recent essay *Zona*, Geoff Dyer suggests a meta-cinematographic reading of *Stalker* (Andréi Tarkovski, 1979) that abounds in the geographic paradox that I have just described. Dyer proposes to see Tarkovski's film as the history of a journey towards a dark room, the place of the promise, where vision is indissolubly united to a particular place. At the very heart of that muddy maze, the experience of vision is associated to the place where contemplation occurs, to the soil where one's feet stop: the Zone is, in this context, the site of vision. Just as the first cinema spectators of the Cinémathèque Française at *rue Messine* had to walk across the corridors avoiding the many film objects accumulated by Langlois until finally arriving to the projection room — open as a natural concavity at the heart of the building — so did the three characters in *Stalker* approach Tarkovski's Zone: not to dominate it with old settlers or conquerers, but to deserve it, as new believers.

Such a close link between site and vision will may come across as slightly exotic, or purely anachronic, today. In the panoptic universe that we inhabit everything has been made not only visible but also globally traceable — I have heard on some occasion that it is no longer important to have seen a film, but to know where to find it on the net. Paradoxically, however, the experience of the spectator has become progressively delocalised, to

the point that it is no longer related to a particular place. Now cinema, or the art of the present, as Serge Daney once wrote, is also the art of *making present* or, perhaps better, of *making oneself present*, of being a presence. Here we have to agree with Dyer: not many films are as capable as *Stalker* to clearly establish the relationship between a vision and the place where the image is presented — in fact, where it is made present. In contrast to an absolutely delocalised image, as it is experienced in the no-space of the internet, *Stalker's* task is to relocate cinema, that is, in making it happen in one place, in *a dark room*, insofar as the memory constructed by the film is founded in a similar topographic exercise and conceived as a personal and collective transit: 'But watching a film like *Stalker*', argues Dyer recalling his first encounter with Tarkovski's work, 'always happened in very precise locations and times. For me, those little cinemas in Paris where I saw many art films for the first time meant that cinema became a kind of pilgrimage site.' (JELLY-SCHAPIRO, 2012: 3).

Following on from Dyer's words, it is not difficult to imagine Müller, Eisenschitz and Klejman penetrating the zone of Russian cinema in search of those invisible images that 'no one would believe'. Eisenschitz the *Writer*, Klejman the *Philosopher* and Müller, of course, the authentic *Stalker*.

5 Together with a negative aesthetics and the need to physically relocate the spectator's gaze (the film-event), the third principle behind 'Ver sin Vertov' corresponds to the need that, on certain occasions, cinema generates of itself. I will conclude with a brief description thereof.

When Dziga Vertov announced his theory of the intervals, as it appears in the text *Us: Variant of a Manifest*, published in 1919, not only was he advancing a way of thinking montage based on the distance between two shots or the movement between two images. He was also marking the place where he would die. Vertov passed away on 12 February 1954, that is, 37 years after the

October Revolution and 37 years before the fall of the USSR in 1991. He died in the interval: let's say, in the space between both images, in the precise juncture where cinema thinks itself. Just a few years before, Stalin's death created the conditions for the great cinematographic regeneration of the Thaw, when four different generations of Soviet film-makers co-existed in almost a decade. At this time, Vertov signalled the editing cut. On hindsight, fifty years later, his obituary doubled as the rib of the negative separating two perfectly symmetrical, inverted shots – an effect of specular estrangement similar to the ones Artavazd Pelechian liked to make in his films, of course taking on the principles of Vertov's montage.

There are certain enigmas proposed in the films that can only be resolved through cinema itself. Questions that, at times, remain

suggested in absent counter-shots, in haunting gazes, in express promises or never completed encounters. Often the dilemma arises from the historical account that they themselves suggest based on the iconographic memory kept in their interior, perhaps inadvertently. In this instance, to programme is not only an exercise of *mise en scène*, that is, of a certain continuity or articulation between images, but of a *mise en abîme*, an abysmal and disorienting narration that leads to other films, perhaps unexpected, but also to other visual and cultural forms, previous to the cinematographic Babel. In this sense, Vertov's interval, embodied to a paradoxical extreme in the film-maker's biography, was too capricious not to assume it as a model to assemble and programme films. Ultimately it was an invitation to navigate the space of Soviet cinema departing from a shot that wasn't there, but which nonetheless kept on being evoked. ●

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Professor and researcher of the Department of Slavic Studies at the Instituto Universitario de Cultura de la Universidad Pompeu Fabra de Barcelona, where is currently undertakes his PhD on landscape in Russian art and cinema. Professor of Film Aesthetics at the Universidad de Navarra. He curated the retrospective 'Ver sin Vertov' ('To See Without Vertov') at La Casa Encendida in Madrid in 2004–05, [error en el original en castellano] a season aiming to reconstruct the tradition of Russian and Soviet documentary film-making in the second half of the 20th Century. He was also the curator of the first retrospective of Russian film-maker Alexander Sokurov in Spain [where and when], of the complete works of Irina Evteeva [where and when] and of the programme 'El

silencio en el cine documental post-soviético' ('Silence in Post-Soviet Documentary Film') [where and when]. He founded the Festival Punto de Vista, and was its Artistic Director until 2009. He has participated in numerous collective publications, such as *Una diagonale baltica. Ciquant'anni di produzione documentaria in Letonia, Lituania ed Estonia*, and edited the books *Ver sin Vertov. Cincuenta años de no ficción en Rusia y la URSS (1955-2005)*; *El cine de los mil años, Una aproximación al cine documental japonés*; *Ermanno Olmi, Seis encuentros y otros instantes*; and *The Man Without the Movie Camera: the cinema of Alan Berliner*.

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