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## The *Kino-Eye* Montage Procedure as a Formal Experiment

**Abstract:** This text presents an analysis of the relationship between *Kino-Eye*, the Russian montage technique that was most clearly demonstrated by Dziga Vertov in his 1929 film *The Man with a Movie Camera*, and Russian Formalist theory, which underwent an intensive period of development during the 1920s. Russian Formalism, established primarily as a theory of literature, was likewise applied in film and the visual arts. A dominant characteristic of Soviet film authors and theorists from the avant-garde period was a preoccupation with linguistic aspects and an understanding of film itself in terms of language. Transposing Viktor Shklovsky's notion of *defamiliarization* [*остранение, ostranenie*] to the visual experience of Vertov's film contributes to an additional understanding of the usage of unconventional camera angles, diagonal camera positions, as well as to the interpreting of the *Kino-Eye* montage procedure. The experimental montage procedure of *Kino-Eye* is posited as an attempt to decode the world through the lens of a film camera, while understanding this procedure is linked to the impact of Shklovsky and Russian Formalism on Russian 1920s cinema.

**Keywords:** the *Kino-Eye* montage procedure; Russian Formalist school; avant-garde; film; montage

### The *Kino-Eye* montage procedure as an avant-garde experiment

The *Kino-Eye* montage procedure devised by the Russian director Dziga Vertov was an avant-garde experimental attempt at decoding the world through the lens of a film camera; as a concept in film theory, it was conceived during the 1920s. Vertov opposed the kind of thinking in film that predicated on illustration and mimesis as an artistic approach. In that sense, he made a complete break with the traditionalists, arguing that film should be kept strictly separate from literature and theatre. He placed the ontology of natural human vision in conflict with that of the film camera. Annette Michelson thus writes:

Vertov begins his career in 1919 with a death verdict pronounced on all motion pictures made until then. He is making no exceptions and redefines cinema as capturing ‘the feel of the world’ through the substitution of the camera, that ‘perfectible eye’, for the human eye, that ‘imperfectible one’. For Vertov, then, the distinction or conflict between what was known as the ‘art film’ and any other kind of cinema then being made was totally without meaning. He relocated the frontier between mimesis and ‘the feel of the world’, recalling to us Shklovsky’s command: “We live as if coated with rubber. We must recover the world.”<sup>1</sup>

Vertov categorically rejected mimesis as an artistic approach and fully embraced the technological advancements that were meant to supplant the human eye. “Vertov’s disdain of the mimetic, his concern with technique and process, with the extensions and revelation, stamp him as a member of the Constructivist generation.”<sup>2</sup> Dziga Vertov (Дзига Вертов, born David Kaufman [Давид Абелевич Кауфман], russified to Denis Arkadievich Kaufman [Денис Аркадьевич Кауфман]) was born in Białystok [Bialystok], in what is now Poland. *Dziga* is Ukrainian for ‘spinning top’ or a ‘busy’ or ‘hurried’ person. *Vertov* comes from the Russian verb *вертеть*, “to spin, turn, rotate”. He assumed the pseudonym “Dziga Vertov” around 1915, in reference to the whirring sound of a film camera and its turning crank.

His most accomplished montage procedure – the Kino-Eye experiment – was implemented in his film *The Man with a Movie Camera*.<sup>3</sup> The film was premiered in Kiev on January 8, 1929 and then at Moscow’s Hermitage Theatre on 9, April 1929.<sup>4</sup> In July 1929, Vertov presented the film in Berlin and Paris. In spring 1930, the film was shown in New York.<sup>5</sup> The theory of the Kino-Eye montage procedure rests on the assumption that the camera is more ‘perfectible’ than the human eye and as such well suited for documenting real-life occurrences. By contrast, Vertov dismissed fictional film as overburdened by the influences of theatre and fake staging. Here is Vertov explaining the making of a film:

To make a montage is to organize pieces of film, which we call the frames, into a cine-thing. It means to write something cinematic with the recorded shots. It does not mean to select pieces, to make ‘scenes’ (deviations of a theatrical character), nor does it mean to arrange pieces according to subtitles (deviations of a literary character). Every Kino-Eye production

<sup>1</sup> Annette Michelson, “From Magician to Epistemologist: Vertov’s *The Man with a Movie Camera*,” in *The Essential Cinema: Essays on Films in the Collection of Anthology Film Archives*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: New York University Press, 1975), 100–1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>3</sup> Produced by: All-Ukrainian Photo Cinema Administration (ВУФКУ, ВУФКУ) – Kiev; Directed by (“Author – Experiment Performed by”): Dziga Vertov; Director of Photography: Mikhail Kaufman; Edited by: Elizaveta Svilova; Format: b/w, 35 mm; Camera: Debrie, with Zeiss optics (35 and 70 mm); Length: 1,889 m; Runtime: 66 min 30 seconds at 24 frames per second.

is mounted on the very day that the subject (theme) is chosen, and this work ends only with the launching of the film into circulation in its definitive form. In other words, montage takes place from the beginning to the end of production.<sup>4</sup>

The Kino-Eye theory rests on an apotheosis of the camera and its power to portray reality in an entirely accurate and foolproof fashion. Snippets of life, recorded by a camera, attain the status of total truth in a film only in the process of montage. In Vertov's own words:

The lens is precise, unerring, and should be placed at the centre of action, of real facts, filmed outside the studio, without actors, sets, or a script. I am Kino-Eye, I create a man more perfect than Adam, I create thousands of different people in accordance with preliminary blueprints and diagrams of different kinds. I am Kino-Eye. From one person I take the hands, the strongest and most dexterous; from another I take the legs, the swiftest and most shapely [...] and through montage I create a new, perfect man... Down with bourgeois fairy-tale scenarios... Long live life as it is! Kino-Eye is kino-truth!<sup>5</sup>

In the early 1920s, leading representatives of the Russian school of montage formulated its constructivist principle: the desired effect was to be obtained only by means of specific modes of connecting individual shots into a cinematic whole. Viewed on their own, shots are entirely devoid of meaning, which is generated only by arranging and relating them to one another. Before it enters the process of linking up with another shot, each shot must be short and dynamic. Combining shots produces a new aesthetic reality, which, through montage, generates a new space and time, independent from the space and time of the preceding two shots. In this way, the constructivists demonstrated that meaning in cinema is expressed only by means of cinematic language and that one could not decipher it otherwise. In the Russian avant-garde of the 1920s, the constructivist principle, which held that the effect of an artistic utterance rests precisely on the construction of the work and the configuration of its internal elements, was the dominant way of thinking. To explain the meaning of Vertov's embrace of the strategies of Constructivism, as well as the overall context

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<sup>4</sup> According to research performed by Graham Roberts, following its Moscow première, the film was shown in workers' clubs around Moscow, with discussions followed by official screenings (Graham Roberts, *The Man with the Movie Camera* (London: New York, I. B. Tauris, 2000), 11.

<sup>5</sup> The film was shot on the following locations: 1) Moscow – Kino-Eye materials from 1924 and 1925 (e.g. the “Magician and Children” sequence and some of the capital's famous sights: Tverskaya Street, Bolshoi Theatre and the square in front); 2) Kiev, May–September 1928 – material made during preparations for montage and during editing itself (e.g. the cinema and the train station); 3) Donbas, spring 1928 – material collected during the filming of *The Eleventh Year*; 4) Yalta and Odessa, summer 1928 – the scenes from the beach, the fair, and the family celebration. Following the preview screening in Kiev, during the final week of September 1928, the film went through several reconstructions. *Ibid.*, 9.

of the history of art at the time, Annette Michelson compares Vertov's work with a constructivist piece of architecture, the model for the Monument to the Third International by the Russian artist and architect Vladimir Tatlin from 1920.<sup>6</sup> The monument was meant to feature a hemisphere on top of a cylinder, itself supported by a pyramid, with a cube at the bottom: in the same order, those objects were meant to house the propaganda office, executive council, and parliament of the Third International. The three structures were to be combined in such a way as to enable them to rotate: the hemisphere would complete one rotation every day, the pyramid once a month, and the cube once a year. Michelson writes:

This triadic structure, multi-functional in design, turning at three different and simultaneous speeds (encompassing the full temporal scale of day, month, and year), receiving and emitting information, bulletins and manifestoes, projecting film from a screen and writing weather forecasts in light upon the heavens, is 'based', as Malevich remarked, 'upon the Cubist formula' as much as *The Man with the Movie Camera* is grounded in the technique of montage. Both structures propose a hyperbolic intensification of those techniques, insisting upon the materiality of the object and upon its architectonics as the core of interest. It is for these reasons and perhaps insofar as both structures *do*, in their polyvalence and circularity, more literally revolve about a core, that they seem – in a common movement of transgression – to converge upon the definition of a style, a program, a 'semantics' of construction.<sup>7</sup>

Mikhail Kaufman, the cameraman of *The Man with a Movie Camera*, argued that the individual parts of the totality of a cinematic reality may be constructively posited and organized from a wide range of positions in the surrounding reality:

An ordinary person finds himself in some sort of environment, gets lost amidst the zillions of phenomena, and observes these phenomena from a bad vantage point. He registers one phenomenon very well, registers a second and a third, but has no idea of where they may lead. [...] Do you understand? He joins these phenomena with others, from elsewhere, which may not even have been filmed by him. Like a kind of scholar he is able to gather empirical observations in one place and then in another. And that is actually the way in which the world has come to be understood.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Vertov, in: Michelson, "From Magician to Epistemologist," 103.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in *Leksikon filmskih i televizijskih pojmova* (A Lexicon of Film and Television Terminology), CD-ROM, Univerzitet umetnosti, Belgrade.

<sup>8</sup> Unlike Malevich's Suprematism, the Constructivists (Tatlin, Rodchenko, Stenberg, Johansson) saw the foundations of a new type of formal creativity not in aesthetics, but in the internal structure of things.

Vertov explains that the constructive process of making a film unfolds under the guidance of a “machine – the eye”. He considers the organization of a cinematic composition from the perspective of the duration of movement and pays special attention to the relations between foreshortenings of perspective, light and shadow, and the filming speed. The purpose of editing was to show what the human eye could not see: the truth that is visible only beyond the biological limitations of the eye, but with the aid of a microscopic machine – the Kino-Eye. Generally speaking, the poetics of the Russian avant-garde “was formed around the Machine. The pathos of avant-garde art finds expression in the ideas of functionality, simplicity, unity, and wholeness, locating its ideal not in the sphere of biological but mechanical life”<sup>9</sup> The Russian notion of utopia was likewise based on the idea of mutual equality among people, who would be mutually replaceable, like the parts of a machine. In *The Man with a Movie Camera*, Vertov foregrounds the mechanical movements and capabilities of the camera. Apart from that, the film also highlights the beauties of the human body in motion, approximating the operation of a machine (the movements of telephone operators, athletes’ feet, etc.). For the Russian avant-garde in general, the machine embodied their project of a large-scale engineering reorganization of the world and the results of the social progress of the new socialist society.

In 1924, Vertov and Kaufman began their wide usage of the moving parts of Soviet industry, mounting their cameras on rail tracks, cranes, cars, train carriages, and assembly lines in factories, steel plants, and mines. The expansion and improvement of film production technology was thus inscribed in the chronicles of the industrialization process, which formed the central axis of their mature work.<sup>10</sup>

David Parkinson links the high degree of industrialization shown by the Kino-Eye technique to Vertov’s revolutionary propaganda:

Vertov and his co-editor, Elizaveta Svilova, used prismatic lenses, dissolves, multiple superimpositions, split screens, tints, animation, microcinematography and staccato editing, thus disregarding reality and entering the realm of cine-poetry in order to show both the spirit of the Revolution and the vital role of cinema within it.<sup>11</sup>

Jacques Aumont likewise foregrounds the Kino-Eye procedure as a revolutionary kind of engagement, and the necessary social grounding of Vertov’s procedure.

<sup>9</sup> Michelson, “From Magician to Epistemologist,” 102.

<sup>10</sup> Mikhail Kaufman, “An Interview with Mikhail Kaufman,” *October* (Essays in Honor of Jay Leyda) 11 (Winter, 1979): 65.

<sup>11</sup> Aleksandar Genis [Alexander Genis], “Šavovi vremena. Trougao: avangarda, socrealizam, postmodernizam,” [The Stitches of Time. The Triangle: The Avant-Garde, Socialist Realism, Postmodernism] *Letopis Matice srpske* 466, 7–8 (2000): 109.

Vertov's originality – and he is a first-class editor – is in his claim that montage (displaying) is possible only if based on an accurate *view*. We cannot organize a visible reality so that the viewer understands it unless the viewer has not *really* seen it. That view is a matter for the filmmaker, as well as for the camera, in its capacity of a super-eye, better equipped for viewing the reality than the human eye; 'A Man with a Movie Camera', the true centaur of the Film century, connects human intelligence with the cinematographic faculty of seeing – he sees the world because he creates it in his mind and vice versa; thus ordering and determining everything, he thereby surveys the world 'from the viewpoint of the Revolution', that is, commands the means for generating the truth.<sup>12</sup>

Vertov's *Kino-Eye* montage procedure determines the way the meaning of an external referent, from the surrounding world, is redefined in a cinematic text and how montage strategies construct the cinematic text. The *Kino-Eye* procedure emerges as an autonomous artistic phenomenality, independent from any object, situation, or event in the referential system of the surrounding world. A new cinematic reality is thereby redefined and established, constructed by the experimental formal procedure of *Kino-Eye*. Understanding this kind of procedure is linked to the impact of Viktor Shklovsky [Виктор Борисович Шкловский] on the Formalist film school. As part of his Formalist thesis about revealing the artistic procedure in the literary work, Shklovsky wrote that "The aesthetic form is presented without any motivation whatsoever, simply as is."<sup>13</sup> Annette Michelson has likewise written about the close connection between the Soviet school of montage and Formalist theory:

The notion of film as language, the concern with the linguistic aspects and analogues of film structure, is, as we know, one of the dominant characteristics of Soviet filmmakers and theoreticians of the heroic period. The hyperbolic intensification and growth of montage style with its attendant metaphoric thrust, the manner in which film after film – from *Strike* through Trauberg's *China Express* – tends towards the elaboration of a central metaphoric cluster, testify to the importance and the depth of a concern natural in men living close to the sources of modern linguistics and of formalist criticism in the work of Shklovsky, Brik, Jakobson. [...] *The Man with a Movie Camera* is, among other things, a massive testimonial to this concern, sharing, hyperbolizing the use of metaphor, simile, synecdoche, rhyming images, parataxis.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Mihailo P. Ilić, *Serbian Cutting* (Beograd: Filmski centar Srbije, 2008), 470.

<sup>13</sup> David Parkinson, *History of Film* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2002), 72.

<sup>14</sup> Žak Omon, *Teorije sineasta* (Beograd: Clio, 2006), 18. Translator's note: Serbian translation of Jacques Aumont, *Les théories des cinéastes* (Nathan, 2002).

## Russian formalism as an artistic approach

Russian Formalism (1915–1928) was conceived primarily as a literary theory. The chief representatives of Russian Formalism were Boris Eikhenbaum, Viktor Shklovsky, Roman Jakobson, and Yuri Tynyanov. Formalism was also applied to the visual arts, film, and theatre. Formalism is a scholarly, artistic, and philosophical conception based on the idea that the task of art is to produce formal (non-referential) and autonomous structures. In theoretical terms, Formalism is a conception focused on exploring the form of artworks.

Shklovsky advocates the position that art is ‘pure form’, as well as that the essence of an artwork consists of relations in the literary material. Via his conception of *art as technique*, Shklovsky attempts to (dis)assemble the mechanism of a literary text’s internal structure and its linguistic-rhythmic organization. By breaking the sequences of a literary text and disassembling its poetic sequence, Shklovsky proves that the essence of an artistic object is realized by means of perception, not knowing:

And art exists so that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar’, to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged [...] A crooked road, a road in which one feels acutely the stones beneath it, a road that turns back on itself – this is the road of art.<sup>15</sup>

By “crooked road”, Shklovsky means the difficult possibility of developing a ‘sensation’ for the literary procedure, that is, its formal construction and not its content.

In the early stages of cinematography, moving images provoked in viewers either feelings of alarm (sequences showing an incoming train) or nausea (sequences shot by a swinging camera), which means that viewers found it difficult to distinguish moving images from reality. The early-1920s experiments and explorations of Kuleshov, Tynyanov, and Shklovsky showed the extent to which montage, among other things, enabled uncovering conditionality in linking shots together. At the time, the shot’s two-dimensionality constituted a complication for the three-dimensional world of reality and it was only thanks to the development of montage that the shot lost its autonomy from reality. In line with that, the Formalists asserted that the ordering of a pair of shots is not just the simple sum of those two shots, but a combination of two shots into a complex, reflexive unity that could be interpreted on a higher level. Eikhenbaum asserts:

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<sup>15</sup> Viktor Shklovsky, “The Novel as Parody,” in Viktor Shklovsky and Benjamin Sher, *Theory of Prose* (Elmwood Park, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990), 147.

A film unfolds in time. The viewer focuses not only on each new shot, taken separately, but also brings it into mutual relations with the preceding and the following shot. To a significant degree, the meaning of each shot is conditioned by its links with the following or preceding shot. One and the same shot yields various nuances of meaning, depending on its relations to other shots. The viewer is forced to decipher those meanings, to link individual shots with one another, and the director to construct a montage without uncovering those relations and meanings that arise from them (sometimes literal, sometimes metaphorical). Therefore, a film viewer must engage in complex mental labour to connect individual shots and decipher those nuances of meaning. This labour is what I also call the internal speech of film viewers.<sup>16</sup>

Coherence between shots may not be linked to the story itself, but instead rests on stylistics. In pre-Formalist films, montage meant splicing individual shots, in order to explain the main story. Dušan Stojanović asserts that the fundamental idea of the Soviet school of montage was based precisely on montage principles, that is, on linking shots. According to Stojanović, it was precisely Kuleshov who formulated the constructivist principle:

The effect of a cinematic utterance rests on its mode of construction – how we distribute the shots will determine the kind of effect we will obtain. Meaning arises from the relations among the shots, which individually must be extremely simplified, short, and amply dynamic.<sup>17</sup>

Thus before editing, shots have their mutually independent meanings, whereas the meaning of the film itself derives only from their relationship in montage. A shot, according to Stojanović, constitutes ‘raw material’, while montage enables one to guide the viewer’s attention.

Among other things, cinematic illusionism also rests on the process of montage. However, in *The Man with a Movie Camera*, using a shock strategy that was radical at the time, Vertov explicitly shows the viewer a breakdown of cinematic illusionism right in front of her eyes. In parallel with the film narrative’s main flow, the audience in the movie theatre also gets to see the very process of the making of the film – Vertov shows his editor Svilova editing the recorded material. In terms of perception, *The Man with a Movie Camera* may be divided into three levels. The first level comprises the cameraman’s story, shooting the material for the film. The second level consists of shots of an audience watching the editing of the material recorded by the cameraman. The third level comprises the film proper, as shot around Moscow, Kiev, and Odessa.

<sup>16</sup> Michelson, “From Magician to Epistemologist,” 105.

<sup>17</sup> Viktor Shklovsky, “Art as Technique,” quoted in Žaneta Đukić, “Neumorni toretičar,” in Viktor Šklovski, *Energija zablude. Knjiga o sižeu* (Beograd, Prosveta, 1985), 361. Translator’s note: Editor’s introduction to the Serbian translation of Viktor Shklovsky’s *Energy of Delusion: a Book on Plot*.



The third level constitutes the text of the film, whereas the former two levels tell its story, that is, its meta-text. This meta-text, woven into the film itself, causes the viewer to lose that basic feeling of illusion and make-believe. Michelson writes:

The result, articulated most powerfully through the preservation of the filmmaking editing and projection process, is a revelation, an exposure of the terms and dynamics of cinematic illusionism. And this it is – and not the speed, complexity, formal virtuosity, ‘obscurity’ – that produced the shock, the scandal, the bewilderment in its beholders. It is the manner in which Vertov questions the most immediately powerful and sacred aspect of cinematic experience, disrupting systematically the process of identification and participation, generating at each moment of the film’s experience *a crisis of belief*. In a sense most subtle and complex, he was, Bazin to the contrary, one of those directors ‘who put their faith in the image’; that faith was, however, accorded to the image seen, recognized as *an image* and the condition of that faith of recognition, the consciousness, the subversion *through* consciousness of cinematic illusionism.<sup>18</sup>

### **Altering visual perception as an imperative of Russian avant-garde**

The avant-garde strategies of destroying cinematic illusionism and the new semantic unity of two consecutive film shots edited together constituted significant innovations at the time, even in the context of international cinema. In the Soviet montage experiment, the problem of the two-dimensionality of the cinematic shot, as well as representing the surrounding reality in two dimensions, becomes a two-dimensional representation of three-dimensionality. The Soviet school of montage abandons the representation of two-dimensionality, hitherto a fundamental feature of traditional film, and develops a Constructivist visualization of space. In his liberal use of fast cutting, by means of dissolves, using different lenses, animation, micro-cinematography, multiple superimpositions, long shots, as well as high contrasts of black and white, Vertov defined what is today one of the driving foundations of post-industrial society. Lev Manovich explains that the avant-garde vision is materialized today through the computer and introduces the term *metamedia*,<sup>19</sup> highlighting the fact that new media are a sort of post-media, because they use old media as their starting material. Non-standard camera angles – bird’s- and worm’s-eye views, diagonal camera positions, extreme wide shots, filming from the top of a skyscraper, a moving car, an airplane, and the like – served as a metaphor of a new civilization. Similarly, new geometric solutions characterized 1920s artistic design, for the purposes of promot-

<sup>18</sup> Michelson, “From Magician to Epistemologist,” 108.

<sup>19</sup> For more detail, see Lev Manovič, *Metamediji. Izbor tekstova* (Beograd: Centar za savremenu umetnost, 2001).

ing the new revolutionary ideology. According to Manovich, these techniques have blossomed in interactive computer 3D graphics, which enables the user to observe an object from whatever angle she prefers. Lev Manovich links the artistic methods and strategies of the 1920s avant-garde vision to, among other things, Shklovsky's theory:

Putting into practice Russian critic Victor Schklovsky's [*sic*] notion of 'defamiliarization' or 'making strange' (In Russian, 'ostranenie'), advanced originally in relation to literature, a number of photographers in the 1920s begun [*sic*] to use unorthodox viewpoints in their photographs: aerial and worm's-eye views, diagonal positions of the camera, elimination of the horizon line, extreme close-ups.<sup>20</sup>

Further arguing that during the 1990s the radical avant-garde aesthetic vision became the standard of computer technology, Lev Manovich explains today's use of the term 'defamiliarization': "Defamiliarization' now involves simply a movement of a computer mouse to change the perspective, thus getting a new way of the scene."<sup>21</sup> A change of perception in the broadest possible sense was one of the main strategies of the Russian avant-garde in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Transposing the literary notion of 'defamiliarization' to the domain of visual experience generated the possibility of altering visual perception, which Vertov technologically enhanced by using a moving camera.

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<sup>20</sup> Lev Manovich, "Avant-garde as Software," [http://manovich.net/content/04-projects/027-avant-garde-as-software/24\\_article\\_1999.pdf](http://manovich.net/content/04-projects/027-avant-garde-as-software/24_article_1999.pdf), acc. January 10, 2018.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

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