

One Sixth of the World: Avant-garde Film, the Revolution of Vision, and the Colonization of the USSR Periphery during the 1920s (Towards a Postcolonial Deconstruction of the Soviet Hegemony)

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*For Rønnog and Steve Seaberg,
citizens of the six sixths of the world*

Difference, sameness, and “not-as-yet-sameness”: East European (post)coloniality?

Although this article was originally presented at a conference on postcoloniality, I have to begin with a few reservations about the applicability of this term to the territories that were formerly owned or controlled by the USSR, and especially with regard to its Western frontier, i.e. the present-day Baltic States and the states of former Eastern Europe.¹ There are three objections against subsuming these territories, their histories and identities under this academic designation. One objection, paradoxically, comes from the academic field itself, as postcolonial scholars tend not to include Soviet and post-Soviet cultures in their academic agendas, mostly out of a mere lack of competence² (although this deficiency has been considerably but inconclusively addressed in recent years, the immense diversity of post-Soviet locations and contexts are yet to be accounted for).

The second conceptual objection is related to the idea that colonialism and colonization originate in West European modernity: colonialism is an intervention from the West – not from the East. Christianity, capitalism, industrial technology, enlightenment, and eurocentric knowledge set the parameters of colonialism, none of which apply to the USSR in relation to its Western periphery. The USSR carried the Western territories under its rule by means of a militant state atheism, a socialist planned economy, and a collectivization campaign in agriculture that was, technologically speaking, inferior to already existing practices. Instead of

¹ Applicability of post-colonial analytical apparatus to this region is also discussed – and resolved in various ways but all in the affirmative — by practically every of the 20 contributors in Kelertas, Violeta (ed.), *Baltic Postcolonialism*. Rodopi : Amstersam and New York, 2006. See, in particular, Violeta Kelertas. “Introduction: Baltic Postcolonialism and its Critics”. *Op.cit.* pp. 1-10.

² David Chione Moore. “Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique”, *PMLA*, Vol. 116, No. 1, Special Topic: *Globalizing Literary Studies*. (Jan., 2001), pp. 111-128, revised and reprinted in Violeta Kelertas (ed.) *Baltic Postcolonialism*, pp. 11-44.

furthering enlightenment, it brought about a stagnation of intellectual life under the Stalinist/Zhdanovian slogan of cultural diversity representing cultures as inarticulately “national in form, socialist in content”.

Such is the formal argument against the inclusion of the Soviet case in postcolonial studies. It is to be noted that the USSR also intervened in Latin America, Africa, and Asia, which is often forgotten. In these territories the Soviet intervention actually contributed to the fall of the colonial system, especially in the overseas countries who were members of the global socialist system, for instance Angola, Cuba and North Vietnam. None of these post-Soviet subjects have, as far as I know, been included in post-Soviet studies.

On the other hand, it is the conception of Stalinist cultural politics (with its campaigns against illiteracy, the modernization of everyday life, ideological education and other measures against the population’s “cultural retardedness”) that gives rise to objections against the applicability of the postcolonial paradigm to the USSR. Indeed, from the point of view of the Eastern European intelligentsia, such a “civilizer” appears less “civilized” than its East European subaltern. The USSR is rather perceived as an “Asiatic” barbarian, a new Chengiz-khan with no idea of, or concern for, European cultural values. Such is the conservative critique against the application of the postcolonial paradigm to the Baltic States and Eastern Europe, a view which was predominant during the period of post-Soviet transition in the region. Conservative East European intellectuals believe, as was once communicated at a conference in 1991, that “it will be shaken off as a tree shakes water off its leaves after the rain.”

Now then, what could be an argument *for* postcoloniality? It is an empirical rather than a theoretical one. Nowadays, as a result of the process of Europeanization, the Western periphery of the former Soviet empire has once more become the Eastern frontier of the West. Although the center of the region has changed the “core vs. fringes” distinction has been retained. The Europeanness of the newly (re-)Europeanized countries is experienced by the European “core” as a distinct otherness – not as a difference but as a “not-as-yet-sameness”. This “not-as-yet-sameness” presupposes that the “not-as-yet” will be successfully eliminated, resulting from the furtherance of democratic values in the East European population, the increasing transparency of economic and political processes, and the upgrading of institutions to meet the EU standards. Thus the age-old Modern colonialist notion of time – with its unidirectional evolutionary movement towards a predictable future, and its values of progress and development – can also be discerned in the new rhetoric of European democracy. What is at stake is not respect of singularity and difference, but a silent presupposition of a “not-as-yet-sameness” to be overcome with time and proper guidance. This presupposition underlies political decisions in the “fringes” and characterizes the identity of the area in the eyes of the “core”. It is not a difference to be respected, but a “not-as-yet-sameness” to be overcome in time, through proper guidance. Interestingly enough, the empire of the USSR proceeded from the same assumptions with regard to identity and difference, since it also conceived of time in terms of progression towards a universal Communist sameness. They saw their subjects as “not-as-yet-same”, developing towards the “same-as” with the evolving socialist world system. It was precisely this logic of hegemony that the USSR used as a justification for its occupation after World War 2, for its interventions in the left movements in the West, and for its political and military presence in the Third world.

The Soviet hegemony, therefore, is the issue that has to be addressed first, before we can determine whether a discussion of Soviet colonialism or post-Soviet postcoloniality is legitimate.

The Production of Soviet Hegemony

For this purpose, we have to reconsider the central notions of Soviet hegemony, its “not-as-yet-communism” and respective identity, the “not-as-yet-sameness” (“national in form and socialist in content”). This reconsideration must include the initial construction of these hegemonic notions in the 1920s, at the very inception of the Stalinist state. We will see, then, that the early USSR’s policy towards its periphery was quite complex, that the periphery itself was much more varied (and resistant) than the Bolshevik theory concerning the “national question” had anticipated. Moreover, the understanding of hegemony differed among the cultural and political elite. The ultimate triumph of crude force manifested in the occupation of Eastern Europe was not only a repressive response to national resistance in the occupied countries; it was also an act of self-colonization, or repression of the Other in the hegemonist’s own self: the hegemonist’s *external* violence in response to an *internal* ideological conflict. For the sake of brevity I will designate this conflict as one between *imperialist hegemonism* and *cultural hegemony*. As I will argue, in the establishment of the USSR – a sixth part of the world continental territory, in effect one vast periphery dominated by a tiny center in Moscow – the idea of historical progress towards a communist universality was not entertained by the Kremlin alone. Leftist cultural policies in the 1920s – particularly those represented by the programmatic activities of the avant-garde, not least by avant-garde film – were highly instrumental in the creation of the USSR. These leftist policies, which did not wholly contradict the early Soviet project at large (and which had been ruthlessly suppressed by the time Stalin consolidated the Soviet state in the mid-1930s), were invented in an internationalist Marxist spirit. While in principle supporting the regime’s hegemonistic goals to control the periphery and repress local resistance, those cultural policies of the 1920s are rather akin to Antonio Gramsci’s idea of cultural hegemony. Whereas Lenin and Plekhanov used the term *class hegemony* to define the proletariat’s tactical interests in the creation of temporary alliances against the common enemy, Gramsci defined hegemony as a strategy for a “passive revolution”, a revolutionary “war of positions”, and a linguistic turn. Such a revolution takes place in the symbolic domain. Neither this response, nor the manipulative domination against which it revolts, is necessarily violent. As a result of the bourgeoisie’s manipulation, the proletariat find themselves deprived of their own language, which restricts their freedom in the marketplace of symbolic exchanges. Moreover, because of this expropriation of their mother tongue by the language of bourgeois values, the proletariat lose the awareness of their own class interests.³ Hegemony in Gramsci’s sense, although a linguistic term, can easily be extended to other fields like film. It presupposes the proletariat’s recuperation of their own native tongue – a “stolen language”; it enables them to expand their horizons and re-appropriate their class consciousness: the awareness of their presence and role in the world.

During Gramsci’s stay in Moscow in 1920-21, he could have discussed those matters with his Soviet comrades; his ideas could also have influenced the development of the Soviet linguistic debate in the early 1920s – a dramatic period when several agencies were fighting over the

³ Ives, Peter, *Language and Hegemony in Gramsci*. London and Ann Arbor: Pluto Press, Winnipeg: Ferwood Publishing, 2004.

project of the colonization and modernization of the multiple cultures of the USSR through the invention of languages and scripts.⁴ As for Gramsci's direct involvement in this process, we do not know enough about his stay, his contacts and his discussions in Moscow.

Nevertheless, even though the Soviet avant-garde cultural politics of the 1920s was not directly influenced by Gramsci himself, neither confined to Gramsci's ideas about linguistic grammar and the alphabet, nor expressed as programmatically as in Gramsci's cultural hegemony, the avant-garde still shared his aim to re-expropriate what had been stolen from the proletarians: a vision, a language, a self-identity, and a true consciousness – in distinction from the false consciousness of bourgeois ideology. This was the cultural component of the world revolution: the symbolic empowerment of all working people throughout the world.⁵

During the cold war, the Sovietologists understood Soviet hegemony as Stalin's continuation of the early Soviet program of world revolution.⁶ This was not the case, however, since world revolution as a strategic goal (supported by the avant-garde activists) had been abandoned in the mid 1920s, when Stalin started his program of industrialization, made a revision of Lenin's theory of revolution, and proclaimed the theoretical possibility of constructing socialism in one separate country. However, as Boris Groys correctly observes⁷, Stalin's cultural apparatus borrowed its rhetoric and social engineering from the avant-garde who first introduced these ideas. At the same time, it is quite unfair of Groys to imply that the avant-garde project was analogous to Stalinism, and that they shared the imperialist purposes of the Stalinist state. It would be equally unfair of me to say, however, that the avant-garde activities under the sign of cultural hegemony were completely innocent vis-à-vis the hegemonistic pretensions of the Soviet national and international policies. What I want to argue is that the production of Soviet hegemony as we know it from the Cold War period was a historically complex process which Sovietology has grossly oversimplified. For the sake of retrieving this

⁴ Smith, Michael G., *Language and Power in the Creation of the USSR 1917-1953*. Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1998

⁵ In another book, Peter Ives makes a comparative analysis of Gramsci's language politics vis-à-vis Walter Benjamin's ideas of linguistic diversity. Ives, Peter, *Gramsci's Politics of Language: Engaging the Bakhtin Circle and the Frankfurt School*. Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 2004, pp. 97-133. He does not, however, take up another correlation between Gramsci and Benjamin, that between cultural hegemony as a game of "coercion and consent" in the symbolic production of reality and the self, on the one hand, and that of Benjamin's "reception by distraction", *Zerstreuung*: the appropriation of art by the masses in practice, the mastering of symbolic realities *in performance*, "through habit". Benjamin, Walter, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Reproducibility", *Selected Writings*. Vol. 3. 1935-1938. Cambridge, Mass. and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2002, pp. 119-120. I am leaving this parallel in a footnote but want to point out its importance for the construction of a theory of post-Soviet postcoloniality. On the *performance* of hegemony as it appears in Dziga Vertov. See further. Compare both the concepts of hegemony, that of knowledge and that of performance, with the postcolonialist theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's expansion of the idea of hegemony in her definition of the task of teaching the humanities at the university after the crisis of 9-11 and as response to the increasing essentialism of the conservative Western academia (an essentialism, I will add, also relevant in Europe's treatment of the new ex-Soviet European cultures): "In the humanities classroom begins a training for what may produce a criticism that can possibly engage a public sphere deeply hostile to the mission of the humanities when they are understood as a persistent attempt at *an uncoercive rearrangement of desires, through teaching reading*." Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, *Terror: A Speech after 9-11*. *boundary 2* 31.2, 2004, pp. 81-111, emphasis mine. – IS.

⁶ See for instance the bible of the Cold War doctrine of containment, the text that presents the concept of Soviet hegemony to American military strategists, George F. Kennan, *The Long Telegram*. <http://www.ntanet.net/KENNAN.html> (accessed January 17th, 2006).

⁷ Groys, Boris, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.

complexity from under the debris of Soviet and Sovietological constructions, I want to return to the period of the USSR in the making, the 1920s. These are the years of political and cultural construction of that which collapsed in 1991. How was the USSR constructed at this time, of what material and with what technologies was it built? And was it actually *just one* USSR? What kind of media and technology were used for the creation of the utopian avant-garde time-space of the USSR under construction?

What I am suggesting, preliminarily, in the limited space of this article, is that some fundamental features of the avant-garde version of hegemony, which partly coincide in its rhetoric with Kremlin-style hegemony, allow a discussion in postcolonial terms. The avant-garde and the Kremlin hegemony differ, however, in their methods and goals. Notwithstanding these differences, the presence of hegemonistic imagination in the avant-garde can be identified in their concepts and terms, such as:

(1) Thinking in terms of global expansion, whether expressed in terms of a world revolution (Trotsky), or fellow-travellers' utopian belief in the inevitable triumph of socialism throughout the world (which Stalin's program of industrialization accepted but postponed indefinitely);

(2) Thinking in terms of 'the East and the West', 'civilization and wildness', 'progress and retardedness (*otstalost'*)', 'development and underdevelopment', "obscurity (*temnota*) and enlightenment', etc.;

(3) Thinking in terms of 'majority and minority' (*natsmeny*, 'ethnic minorities') and 'center and periphery';

(4) Thinking in terms of, and actively inventing and implementing, various unified, universalising systems of representation (like alphabets and normalized linguistic standards); imagining and constructing universal languages in order to overthrow historical, national, and literary systems of representation;

(4) Thinking, in the arts, in terms of art's own "universal languages", the self-elucidation, self-explication and self-systematization, and, apart from any censorial efforts of the regime, "disciplining" by art itself of its own artistic expression as such; alongside with the theoretical work by Malevich and Kandinsky, one must refer to Dziga Vertov's, Lev Kuleshov's and Sergei Eisenstein's search for a universal language of film;

(5) Thinking in terms of technological dominance, i.e., conceiving of life in the pragmatic terms of social engineering and political management; the denial of history, tradition, and psychology; in general, the technological and teleological questioning of 'how to' and 'where to', in contrast to the genealogical questioning of 'why' and 'where from', which is characteristic of the positivist, self-identifying rhetoric of the national state;

(6) Thinking in terms of 'urban-industrial' (as progressive) and 'rural-patriarchal' (as reactionary); these concepts imply not only to the stigmatization of the peasantry (to be industrialized) but also of ethnic minorities (to be alphabetized), women (to be emancipated through their involvement in productive labour), and children (to be educated in the communist spirit through young pioneer and komsomol organizations). Thus, the *okraina* (outskirts) presupposes not only reclaiming the geographically remote territories of the former Russian empire,

but primarily the upgrading of *all difference* on a truly intersectional basis: class, ethnicity, language, gender, and age.

“Among the arts, film is the most important to us” (Lenin)

Film is an ideal medium for the experimental construction and testing of such technologies, an ideal instrument for reaching out to the masses and carrying the message from the centre to the farthest corners of the periphery. Lenin treated the enlightenment of the masses in a cynical, pragmatic fashion (teaching workers and peasants literacy enough “for them to be able to read out decrees, orders, and appeals”, as he is reported to have said in 1921).⁸ He was fully aware of film’s imperializing potential when he coined his slogan in the early 1920s, that film is the most important art form “to us”.⁹

Avant-garde activists were just as conscious of the potential of the film medium to organize the masses. Aleksei Gan (1895-1942), a constructivist and an ardent supporter of new Soviet film, was one of the first to outline the connection between film technology and the new historical time in 1922. This new concept of time is expressed in images of movement, mass, and velocity:

Our Revolution is so rich in the movements of the masses, the swiftness with which events arise, their development and disappearance, that only a machine, an apparatus, can capture and record what is happening. We need special means of expression to transmit the real world of human activity to the latecomer or the person who has not yet learned how to see reality in its concrete content. cinema, as a quality of our industrial age, and cinema as a means of expression, is the only production element which can organize consciousness and help us to orientate ourselves in the present day.¹⁰

In this short extract we find some central notions of the avant-garde cinematic representation. First, cinema is understood as an element of production: the production of the self, as Gan put it in another text from 1922.¹¹ Note that Gan makes a literal interpretation of Marx’s metaphor as the symbolic manufacture of the self. Also, the emphasis is on the production of the *self*, not the *other*: Gan’s technological interpretation of history, as is so characteristic of the avant-garde elite of the Soviet cultural centers, does not see an “other” in the new history of mass movements; everybody is included in the “us”. Another important aspect of the role of cinema is its capacity to explain a swiftly transforming reality to the “latecomer”: cinema’s role as a mechanical witness, an accumulator of quickly changing events, the interpreter of these events for those who have not yet learned how to see reality correctly. Finally, cinema is a map and a compass: it offers a better view of the time and the space of the USSR and is thus important for us to orient ourselves. All of these ideas are to be found in the cinematic practice of Dziga Vertov, in his “orientational” film *One Sixth of the World*, to which I will return below.

⁸ Annenkov, Iurii, *Vladimir Lenin. Dnevnik moikh vstrech: Tsikl tragedii*. Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1991. p. 247.

⁹ These words by Lenin are proverbial, but only related by another memoirist, Anatolii Lunacharskii. Otherwise the fact of Lenin saying this is not established as well as the context of quotation is obscure. See just one conscientious but failed attempt of the slogan’s ultimate attribution on <http://liveuser.livejournal.com/62878.html>, accessed October 24, 2006.

¹⁰ Gan, Aleksei, “The Tenth Kino-Pravda”, Yuri Tsivian (ed), *Lines of Resistance: Dziga Vertov and the Twenties*. Le Giornate del Cinema Muto 2004, p. 55.

¹¹ Gan, Alexei, “The Cinematograph and Cinema”. Richard Taylor, Ian Christie (eds), *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents 1896-1939*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1988, pp. 67-68.

Walter Benjamin was not a constructivist but he, too, was mostly concerned with the potential of cinema to symbolically produce and reproduce man. In Benjamin's analysis, it is cinema's phenomenology – the way it produces its "other" – that leads to a reversed, much deeper understanding as compared to Gan's formulation of the link between history, its subject, and the technology of representation. In *The Work of Art in the Age of its Reproducibility*, it is not the advent of the masses (the subject of the new imperialist era in Modern history) that creates the necessity of film and gives rise to film as a medium but, on the contrary, it is film technology itself – its optics, its techniques, and its whole apparatus of image reproducibility – that gives rise to the mass, the mass movement, and the mass individual. The camera demands that a mass movement be "fed" into it; seeking panoramic shots of "hundreds of thousands", it confronts the masses with the apparatus and the masses with themselves:

In great ceremonial processions, giant rallies and mass sporting events, and in war, all of which are now fed into the camera, the masses come face to face with themselves. (...) A bird's eye view best captures assemblies of hundreds of thousands. (...) This is to say that mass movements, and above all war, are a form of human behaviour especially suited to the camera.¹²

As a collective art form, film implies a radical democratization of the spectacle, a technological revolution in (re)production, a consequent restructuring of subjectivity, and a fragmentation and anonymization of agency (whether of the film-maker, of the performing actor, or of the character performed and filmed). Since films are intended to be watched by hundreds of people gathered in the same room, they offer a collective experience, a spectacle that appeals to a collective eye. Film features the life of the masses and is watched by the masses; presented with a cinematic image, the masses confront primarily the representation of their own collective self, and their legitimate claim to be filmed corresponds to their equally legitimate claim to be justly and equally represented in political institutions. At the same time, film is a collective production, it is created by a team, not by a single author. This is especially relevant to the documentary, the truly outstanding invention of mute cinema. With its team-based authorship and its orientation towards "fact", "fact" in this case being a representation constructed by the optics of the camera and the work of the cameraman and the editor. According to Benjamin, fact as a reality performed through the agency of the film camera can serve the (ultimately fascist) mobilization of the masses towards a new imperialist war – and as effectively mobilize the masses against the militarism of imperialist propaganda. What is crucial in the choice of the masses between fascism and anti-fascism, is film's own consciousness towards the way the camera works constructing the spectacle of history. Compared to Gan's analysis, in Benjamin's perspective, film is more than how a technology defines reality and transmits it to the latecomers. To Benjamin, film is a prosthetic sensation and a collective intelligence for the social body, a provider and editor of collective experiences. Given this tendency of film to act *instead of* the human eye, ear, touch, etc. – and, consequently *instead of* human judgment and self-consciousness, the question naturally arises, whether film producers choose to give the collective mass body a false consciousness through cinematic illusions (conducive to fascism and, eventually, to a new world war), or a self-consciousness that would organize the formless, senseless, and brainless masses into a political class. The task of the "anti-fascist" camera as it provides an enlightened class consciousness is to loosen the compactness in which the mass appears to its oppressor. The work of film is that of differentiation:

¹² Benjamin, Walter, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Reproducibility", pp. 132-133.

...the loosening of the proletarian masses is the work of solidarity. (...) In the solidarity of the proletarian class struggle, the dead, undialectical opposition between individual and mass is abolished; for the comrade, it does not exist".¹³

This "loosening", "de-massing" of the mass is, according to Benjamin, the purpose of the strategy of "the politicizing of art" as it is pursued by progressive Soviet avant-garde.¹⁴

Thus Benjamin's analysis of the political mission of film seems to coincide with Lenin's dictatorial thesis about the utmost importance of film "to us" in the manipulation of the masses. In his work, published during the late 1920s, and especially after the Nazis seized power in Germany, Benjamin showed solidarity with the Soviet film platform. This gave rise to a simplified interpretation of Benjamin's own affinities: his allegedly unconditional support of the Soviet project vis-à-vis the development towards fascism in Germany, and his disregard for the catastrophic development in the USSR towards Stalin's show trials of the mid- and late-1930s. Those show trials were staged in full awareness of cinematic spectacularity and of the role of the masses in terror; the scholarly community have still not discussed properly the purely cinematic component of terror, for cinematic technology contributed to the dissemination of this terror. As distinct from Nazism, the Grand Terror never produced a cinematic epic of its own; it was represented mostly through short newsreels. However, these are comparable to the epic cinematic representation of the 1934 Nazi Congress in Nuremberg, directed by Leni Riefenstahl, which was logistically planned and staged for the camera (*Triumph des Willens*, 1934).

"Aestheticizing politics", the strategy of the imperialist mass entertaining industry, is conducive to the total elimination of the masses in a new devastating war to come, as Benjamin wrote in 1936.¹⁵ What about Soviet film and Stalin's terror then? Is there any difference at all between the imperialist aestheticising of politics and the Bolshevik politicising of art? In fact, as early as 1926, Benjamin was quite conscious of Stalin's "class struggle", and he was already concerned about the future of Soviet film, even though he did not make this public. His views are evident, however, in private observations made in his Moscow Diary:

Russian film itself, apart from a few outstanding productions, is not at all that good on the average. It is fighting for subject matter. Film censorship is in fact very strict (...) a serious critique of Soviet man is impossible in film (...) Whether film, one of the more advanced machines for the imperialist domination of the masses, can be expropriated [by the avant-garde cultural policies. – I.S.], that is very much the question.¹⁶

Benjamin was not at all prepared to accept all Soviet things out of party solidarity; nor was he blind to the new processes of Stalin's state building and the way film was used in the erection of the new empire. His diary notes tell us that he did not exclude Soviet film from the perspective of potential "aestheticizing" for the sake of a new world war (Stalin's class war) to come. In 1926-27, he observes that the cultural revolution in the USSR is a gigantic project, "arresting the dynamic of revolutionary progress in the life of the state – one has entered, like it or not, a period of restoration while nonetheless wanting to store up the energy of the youth

¹³ Ibid., p. 129.

¹⁴ Ibid., 122.

¹⁵ Benjamin, Walter, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Reproducibility", p. 122.

¹⁶ Benjamin, Walter, *Moscow Diary*. Ed. by Gary Smith. Cambridge, Mass, and London: Harvard University Press, 1986, p. 55

like electricity in a battery.”¹⁷ Revolution thus ceases to be experience and becomes mere discourse, manipulated by educators in schools and youth organizations. Film, as the most democratic technology for education and enlightenment, may therefore play a principal role in the reconstruction of the empire. In addition to his cautious analysis of Soviet film, Benjamin’s published review of Soviet film, which focuses on Vertov’s *One Sixth of the World*, is testimony to his prophetic vision.¹⁸ Here, Benjamin observes that Vertov has not achieved

...his self-imposed challenge of showing through characteristic images how the vast Russian nation is being transformed by the new social order (...) What he achieved, however, is the demarcation of Russia from Europe.”¹⁹

Benjamin also refers to the separation of “the one sixth” from the European leftist intellectuals – the theoretical and political fellow-travellers outside of the USSR. Another important observation Benjamin makes seems to undermine the whole program of the cinematic emancipation of the proletariat: the filmed subjects and the film audience are not in fact proletarians; they are peasants. This indicates yet another direction of cinematic colonization. “To expose such audiences to film and radio constitutes one of the most grandiose mass-psychological experiments ever undertaken in the gigantic laboratory that Russia has become.”²⁰ Benjamin also registers another effect of this experimentation: the colonization of film itself by state censorship which, at the time of writing, affects film more severely than theatre and literature. At the end of his review Benjamin indirectly denies that film is a means of constructing (and being) a social body. This, as we will see, is Vertov’s project in *One Sixth of the World*, for this film does not intend to *depict* the body of the USSR, but to *become* that body; not to *present* the USSR, but to *perform* the USSR. Vertov’s failure, according to Benjamin, is due to the fact that in actual reality there is no such thing as a Bolshevik society apart from its cinematic spectres – there is only a mass audience vis-à-vis the Bolshevik state.²¹

However, in spite of Vertov’s failure, irrespective of the possibility of expropriation on a massive scale by the regime, the cinematic image still preserves, in its technological potential, a revolutionizing force of its own. Even though film is expropriable, it is still a powerful technology for emancipation and (re)production of the self: it expands our vision, adds to our knowledge about ourselves, extracts the individual life from its enclosure in the local and the everyday, and opens up the horizons of agency. Film creates and confirms the individual’s belonging to a vast majority of people who do not know each other personally, but who share the collective vision by watching their own collective portrait as it is presented to them by the film camera and the film projector. Even though film technology may be abducted by the pragmatic regime, it never loses its potential to empower the disempowered by enabling democratic, horizontal (cinematic) participation, and providing an anti-hierarchical (filmic) self-representation. Due to its double-edged technology, film is potentially *a tool of enslavement*, but also potentially, and always-already, *a technology of becoming aware*.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 53

¹⁸ Walter Benjamin. On the Present Situation of Russian Film. Quoted from: Tsivian, Yuri (ed.), *Lines of Resistance: Dziga Vertov and the Twenties*, 2004, pp. 210-214.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 212-213.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 213.

²¹ Ibid., p. 214.

The Empowerment of the Blind and the Proletarian Hegemony of Vision

Benjamin's famous formula in which he contrasts the "good" Soviet film as "the politicization of aesthetics" to the "bad" fascist film "as "the aestheticization of politics" has caused quite a lot of ironic eyebrow-raising and indignant shoulder-shrugging among post-Soviet scholars who are not in the Leftist camp. They are ready to reproach Benjamin for his alleged affiliation with Stalin, with Adorno who claimed that Benjamin's theory of distraction implies "identif[ication] with the (Nazi) aggressor".²²

Vertov, on the other hand, was quite open about his own "affiliation" with the Soviet power, seeing the "oppressor" not in the Soviet state regime, but rather in the reactionary film clichés – clichés he devoted his life to demystify. Thus, he liked to compare his filming method (to which I will return later on) with those of the fearsome Bolshevik secret police, the GPU:

The work of the movie camera is reminiscent of the work of the agents of the GPU who do not know what lies ahead, but have a definite assignment: to separate and bring to light a particular issue, a particular affair.²³

Vertov's romantic misunderstanding of the "truth" of the GPU casts a shadow over all early Soviet film (and not without grounds), and also over Benjamin's vision of film technology as politically and aesthetically empowering, especially in the USSR. This latter Benjamin's view of the role of film has recently been described as "technologically utopian". In discussions about the development of the contemporary global film industry, Benjamin's critics still cannot deny the merits of his "utopian" thinking when it comes to predicting the future.²⁴ Utopian or not, Benjamin's attitude toward the politically and socially creative possibilities of film technologies were shared by many at the time. Nor should these possibilities be considered quite exhausted today; in our time of simulated and animated digital visuality, film seems almost to have depleted its innovative and social-constructive potential but remains, nevertheless, a powerful instrument of critical reflection. The current technology of animated and simulated seeing – a new blindness, one might say — also includes the technologies that produce political and theoretical visions, which postcolonial studies and area studies have to be able to deal with.

It is therefore with a starting point in Benjamin's film theory that I will present my case of cinematic politics and geopolitics: Dziga Vertov's legendary film *One Sixth of the World* (1926). Neither Benjamin nor Dziga Vertov regarded a fact as a piece of positive evidence to support a theory; to them, facts were not separable from theory. Rather, a fact was *a piece of self-commenting, self-critical, self-aware life*: "all factuality is already theory", as Benjamin, the Marxist phenomenologist, put it in 1926.²⁵ Or, as Dziga Vertov wrote, more inclined to a natural-scientific understanding of truth in the same year,

²² See a discussion in Bratu Hansen, Miriam, "Benjamin and Cinema: Not a One-Way Street", "Angelus Novus: Perspectives on Walter Benjamin", *Critical Inquiry*. Vol. 25, No. 2. Winter 1999, pp. 306-343, footnote on Adorno's critique p. 313.

²³ Dziga Vertov. Provisional Instructions to Kino-Eye Groups. *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*. Ed. by Annette Michelson. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London : University of California Press, 1984, p. 69.

²⁴ Miriam Bratu Hansen, *Ibid.*, pp. 306-309.

²⁵ Letter to Martin Buber in Walter Benjamin, *Moscow Diary*, p. 132.

Our eyes see very poorly and very little – and so men conceived of the microscope in order to see invisible phenomena; and they discovered the telescope in order to see and explore distant, unknown worlds. The movie camera was intended in order to penetrate deeper into the visible world, to explore and record visual phenomena, *so that we do not forget what happens and what the future must take into account.* (Emphasis mine. – IS.)²⁶

For it is in Dziga Vertov's *One Sixth of the World* that the double-edgedness of film technology becomes especially visible. In 1926, we see the USSR being constructed in response to certain demands. In the Kremlin, where Stalin's *TsK* had already suppressed all party oppositions except the strongest one, the Trotskiite (its termination would begin in the fall of 1927), a vision of the USSR which was to be demanded by the future regime was already in place. In Vertov's film, we see a USSR that is still demanded by a different, unorthodox instance: by cinema itself, with its collective technologies of making-sense through production and reception. Basically, Vertov's project is that of a collectivization of vision, or of a horizontal expansion of vision. What is at stake is an ambitious program of visual alphabetization. What is offered through the filmic vision is not only the image of the sixth part of the world (an immense geographic space with its immense cultural diversity to be appropriated by the proletarians) but, more importantly, a collective subjectivity for the benefit of those who can understand such visions. The camera constructs the new eye; it takes over the perception of the seeing subject (what Marx referred to as "sensuous labour") and enhances the seeing eye's techniques, its optical and interpretational performance. Thus film evolves in its fight against blindness: this project involves a radical negation of individual vision (individual sight is "bourgeois", as all things individual, and is ultimately, if inherited by the masses, conducive or equivalent to blindness). The task is that of the visual re-appropriation of the former empire through its democratic re-distribution among the proletarians in the form of filmic images. It is a *politics of vision*.

The Soviet foreign trade company, *Gostorg*, commissioned Vertov to produce a simple advertisement film about Soviet export and its perspectives. What emerged from Vertov's editing studio was a visual introduction of the USSR, a grandiose representation of the USSR that sought to emulate, through its scope and inventiveness, the scale and the historical uniqueness of the social transformation in the USSR. Immediately after its release in the USSR the film was subjected to devastating political and aesthetic criticism from all directions and very quickly taken off the screens. Its story is the story of the cultural revolution in a nutshell, when the USSR was trying to invent itself as a symbolic entity par excellence and pull itself together as a vast symbolic capital – either to be reclaimed by the proletarians or to be invested in the "construction of socialism in one separate country". We know that it was ultimately the second scenario that became a reality. At the time of the shooting of the film (and at the time when Benjamin watched the film in Moscow), these two possibilities were still in a temporary condition of unstable balance. In Vertov's film, we encounter the vision produced *for* the masses, the vision that *belongs to* the masses, but also the spectacle *of* the masses, as the masses sit in the movie theatre watching a film about themselves. This completely horizontal, anarchist and an-archic democracy of vision, not at all Bolshevik, had not as yet at the time of its production developed into the nightmarish, chilling scenario that Benjamin the Cassandra sketches in the closing lines of *The Work of Art* (and "war" in the extract below is easily substituted for Stalin's designation of terror as "the intensification of class struggle in the socialist society"):

²⁶ Annette Michelson (ed). *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*. Berkeley – Los Angeles – London : University of California Press, 1984, p. 67.

*“Fiat ars – pereat mundus, says fascism, expecting from war (...) the artistic gratification of a sense perception altered by technology (...) Human kind, which once, in Homer, was an object of contemplation by Olympian gods, has now become one for itself. Its (the humanity’s in its capacity of a mass. — IS) alienation has reached the point where it can experience its own annihilation as a supreme aesthetic pleasure.”*²⁷

The Kino-Eye: Film Technology and Horizontal Politics

In this section I will present a very brief overview of Dziga Vertov’s revolutionary inventions in film technology, which he first introduced in collaboration with a group of fellow film makers. They created a common platform in 1918-19 (according to other sources, in 1922) and organized an experimental film group called *the Kino-Eye (Kinoglaz)*. The history of the Kino-Eye group has been extensively discussed, but I am returning to some principles in order to establish the relevance of their experimentation to the questions of hegemony. For this purpose I will focus on the production of the Soviet subjectivity as it was projected by the Kino-Eye in their film work, the production of the colossal, visual figure of the USSR, and the elaboration of a mechanical filmic gaze, a vision for the masses that would be instrumental in the proletarians’ symbolic appropriation of the “one sixth of the world”.

We want to bring clarity into the worker’s awareness of the phenomena concerning him and surrounding him. To give everyone working behind a plow or a machine an opportunity to see his brothers at work with him simultaneously in different parts of the world and to see all his enemies, the exploiters.²⁸

The mission of “capturing the power of vision” was thus to capture the human experience (of seeing and later hearing), re-formatting it, expanding it “through the use of technology”, and giving the audience intelligent control over *what* they saw, and *how*. This is the hegemonic aspect of the filmic gaze, the class bond to be created between international proletarians: seeing together, seeing each other, and seeing the surrounding world. Towards this goal, the Kino-Eye mobilized an unprecedented amount of experimental work developing new filming methods and inventing new production techniques. What makes the Kino-Eye’s project unique and ambitious is that, in addition to the idea of capturing the power of vision, they actually initiated the spectacle of the “socialist fatherland”, to whose space-time the citizen could belong virtually, through the acquisition of the techniques of the gaze. The cinematic spectacle of the USSR thus presupposed not only proletarian spectators’ symbolic reclaiming of the proletarian state, but also the proletarian masses’ reclaiming new eyes, a virtual and collective corporeality assisted by cinematic technology.

By engineering such an eye, by creating a gaze for the masses, the Kino-Eye was thus in effect assisting the production of Soviet citizenship. It is not accidental that their technical search in the construction of the proletarian gaze becomes central in 1925 – 1929, at the very threshold of Stalin’s *velikii perelom* (“the great turning point”), that is, between the beginning of industrialization and the beginning of collectivization. This period in the evolution of the Stalinist state and society is also connected with the political engineering of quite a different, all-Union vision: the Gaze of the Leader. This Gaze was produced through the gradual elimination of alternative and oppositional points of view in the party itself. It was also produced in

²⁷ Benjamin, Walter, “The Work of Art in the Age of its Reproducibility”, p. 122, emphasis mine. – IS.

²⁸ Dziga Vertov. Provisional Instructions to Kino-Eye Groups. *Kino-Eye. The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, pp. 73-74.

the course of kolkhoz building by the physical extermination and dispossession of the lion's share of Vertov's models and viewers: the peasants. As far as Vertov's published materials allow us to judge, he abandons the subject of "sight for the masses" by 1930. Thus it is not only Vertov's idea of recolonization that "misfired" (Benjamin), but also his idea of creating an oppositional model of horizontal democracy: a non-Stalinist citizenship and subjectivity for the Soviet individual.

The Kino-Eye's main artistic principle was "life caught unawares/off-guard" (*zhizn' vras-plokh*), or "life as it is" (*zhizn' kak ona est*). This central thesis received quite a lot of critical attention, especially from the film and literature theorists of the LEF circle (Viktor Shklovskii and Osip Brik) who insisted on the actual inexistence of anything that might be understood as "life as it is". However, the paradox of Kino-Eye's "life as it is" is exactly life's embeddedness in the act of its reflection and representation: the act of shooting/editing the film. Life, according to the Kino-Eye, is that which does not know that it is being filmed, and that which does not pose to be filmed.

The task of a cinematic production of such a life and its further instilment with (filmic) consciousness resulted in Kino-Eye's most daring experimentation. Indeed, today we admire some of their inventions as technically superb, but regard them as ethically suspect. They were the first to introduce the hidden camera, and their capability to invent new and new tricks to distract the attention to "life" was inexhaustible: to spy on life, intrude on it, and capture it off-guard.²⁹ The Kino-Eye did not only learn to use a portable inconspicuous camera, but also to use provocation, for instance, pretending to be filming one thing (directing the crowds' attention to this) while filming the unsuspecting crowd with a different camera.

All this was certainly far from their claims to be shooting life "as it was", without interrupting its normal course, as they confronted life with the extraordinary circumstances of film shooting. Kino-Eye's heritage rather shows how extremely skilful they were, working with their models, allowing life to remain "unawares" as long as possible – and then suddenly confronting its gaze with the gaze of the lens. Their skill is also evident in the way life responds to the confrontation with the lens: the model usually replies with an equally direct look into the camera, smiles at it, and thus signals her readiness to join the game of the making of the film. One such confrontation with "life caught unawares" amazed Vertov himself. He was once shooting in a mental hospital, where a patient responded to his intervention by looking into the camera and mimicking the cameraman. While doing his act of filming the filming, the madhouse inmate was shouting "*Memento mori*". This exemplary filmic episode showed Vertov that "life unawares" – in this case "unaware" to the degree of life itself being outright deranged – is probably a better film-maker than film itself. He included the sequence, together with the madman's message of memory, in one of Kino-Eye's newsreels.³⁰

Meeting the eye of the person being filmed – catching the moment when life suddenly becomes aware of its being filmed, thought, reflected by the camera³¹ – means, therefore, capturing the moment when life stops being life and is transformed into something entirely different: a filmic consciousness and the fun of movie making. Here, life (Russ. *natura*) transforms

²⁹ Tsivian, Yuri (ed.), *Lines of Resistance: Dziga Vertov and the Twenties*, 2004, pp. 42-43 and 384.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

³¹ Compare Chris Marker's poetic reflection on the moment when these two eyes – that of the camera and that of a living human being – meet and recognize the existence of each other (*Sans soleil*, 1982).

into something it originally is not; the unconscious life thus comes to an end, and what begins instead is an exciting game of awareness, a game of mutual recognition between life and the camera – a game that engages both of them into a collaboration of the construction of a common field of vision and performance: the filmic reality of the USSR.

(b) All those tricks, paradoxically, served the purpose of producing an “honest proletarian film”. “Honesty” is thus another apparently simple phenomenon whose production required technological ingenuity, which the Kino-Eye was also aware of. Dziga Vertov’s holy crusade against all cinematic illusionism knew no compromise. He saw film drama as the remains of literary illusionism and detested the exploitation of the clichés of bourgeois theatre that acted film made use of, including professional acting. “Sighs and kisses”, “Mary Pickford’s knickers”, and other clichés of acted – i.e., dishonest – film were to Vertov equivalent to drunkenness of the same origin as the “opium for the people” supplied by the church. An honest film, like a newsreel or a scientific film, was equivalent to the clear vision of a sober, completely self-conscious Bolshevik eye seeking to “decipher” the surrounding world. Still another enemy of the Kino-Eye was narrativity, as it was represented in the film script. Vertov resolutely refused to produce a film through a scenario. Instead of a linear, discursive representation, he composed intertitling which is reminiscent of Maiakovski’s or Walt Whitman’s poetic forms; he drew diagrammatic montage schemes and carefully designed and calculated still-to-still montage tables.³² In the 1940s and 50s, when Vertov had been reduced to an obscure technical position at a documentary film studio, his stubborn negation of the scenario became a barrier for his receiving a better commission. The apparatus of preliminary censorship in the film industry of the Stalinist USSR required a scenario text, and the censors refused to censure his diagrams of montage. Vertov’s honesty thus led to his still deeper alienation from the film making process. An “honest proletarian film” was a film that wished to address the proletariat directly, not only without the censor, but also without any other intermediate, normalizing institutions, such as narrative, dialogue, and acting.

(c) It was only logical that the Kino-Eye proclaimed art (as it was understood in film industry) to be “opium for the people”. In this rephrasing of Marx’ famous critique of religion, the Kino-Eye not only demonstrated their position with regard to the film’s potential power to intoxicate, narcotize, and thus pacify the masses, arresting their march towards revolutionary progress, but they also revealed their understanding of the reactionary nature of filmic illusion and its tendency, like any other form of art, to acquire “a cult value” (Benjamin), to betray its mission to enhance revolutionary awareness (the ideological and political sobriety of the revolutionary class) for the sake of developing a narcissistic, fetishist conception of film as an aesthetic icon. However, even more radical than Vertov’s critique of commercial, narcotizing illusionism in cheap filmic spectacles for the masses is his disavowal of his Bolshevik colleague’s, Sergei Eisenstein’s program of using film for the creation of a new revolutionary myth for the people, as well as of Eisenstein’s pioneering attempts to use film for the creation of a new revolutionary pathos to imbue the masses with. Vertov referred to Eisenstein’s work as “film church” and “capitalist sorcery”.³³ The violent dispute between the two leading leftist film theorists is of great importance for the understanding of the Soviet hegemony, in its representation by the two contrasting artistic approaches, and also in Stalin’s official aesthetics. Vertov’s principles of honest sobriety were rejected and trivialized, while Eisenstein’s montage – with its aim of imbuing the masses with the Soviet pathos through the

³² Ibid., pp. 109-110.

³³ Ibid., pp. 126 and 134.

use of expressive, exaggerated cinematic language – proved much more usable, until the time when USSR became a Stalinist political and ideological automaton.

(d) The Kino-Eye invented an entirely new film production technology in order to democratize film. The film was not shot – it was montaged. What was actually shot were smaller pieces of filmic footage, as many of them as possible, covering as many subjects as they possibly could. The use of found footage was also a pioneering invention. It made no difference which cameraman produced which footage, as long as he or she was working in accordance with the Kino-Eye agenda and with their technology. Film footage obtained this way was gathered into working archives and classified under thematic headwordings (like “Factory”, “Hospital”, “Garage”, and so on). Vertov shows such a library of film clips in his *Man with a Movie Camera*, and he shows the operations of the film editor montaging these pieces together into a filmic statement. Thus, the work of cinematography was not the production of a film in the normal sense of the word but (a) the elaboration of a technology for the collection of material, (b) the creation of encyclopaedically organized archives, whose elements could be used in the production of future films, and (c) the techniques of montage to combine those fragments into a statement. The Kino-Eye were therefore also the encyclopaedists of the new Soviet civilization to come.

However, this resulted in the endless debate about the budget of the production of *One Sixth of the World* between the film team and the economists at the film studio. The sponsors accused Vertov of a colossal over-expenditure, while Vertov argued that with these funds he had produced not one, but many other films: what remained to be done after the library of footage had been collected was only to use the montage technique to create ever new filmic productions. How many films that were thus produced in the production of *One Sixth of the World*, we still cannot say. However, the accountant office won the debate; Vertov was reprimanded for a breach of economic discipline. Relieved of his position at the film studio, he left Moscow for Kharkov, where he later produced his outstanding experiment in film sound, *Enthusiasm* (1930; “a work of Cage before Cage”, as Peter Kubelka, the filmmaker who restored the film in 1972, described it) as well as the world cinema’s absolute and all-time masterpiece, *The Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), in which two films he included some footage he had accumulated during the period of the production of *One Sixth of the World*.

(e) The practice of the Kino-Eye’s film-making produced both theoretical and political challenges. For Vertov, those were but the logical outcomes of film’s inherently open, democratic, anti-hierarchical nature as a technology of representation. With the elimination of the author, the question of property – “whose film?” – was also eliminated: film was in every respect no one’s, that is, everyone’s property. Thus film technology and practice worked against the capitalist economy of authorship, which is based on the accumulation and holding of rights, priorities, authority, merits, fame, fees, etc. Instead, a collectivistic open economy was evolving: the renunciation of the petty vanity of a creative author, an equal possession in terms of authorial authority; a renunciation of the very instinct of possession and accumulation in the making of films. All these freedoms, one must remark, were introduced in the rhetoric of commissarial decrees and dictatorial instructions. Needless to say, the realization of such principles produced multiple conflicts, first, with other filmmakers (whose production Vertov so easily incorporated in his own), secondly, inside the Kino-Eye group, and, thirdly, between them and the studio administration. At the same time, this radical an-archic re-distribution of the power of the filmic gaze also led, logically, to the elimination of the idea of film as a piece of artistic work.

(f) “Not a factory of dreams but a factory of facts” – such was the Kino-Eye’s central slogan in terms of the reality they wanted their film to be able to construct. This issue was broadly debated at the time (I have already mentioned LEF and their theory of fact which partly coincided with that suggested by the Kino-Eye). In connection with the discussion about Eisenstein’s *October* (1927) an additional dimension of this debate surfaced: the filmic nature of the historical fact. The Kino-Eye advocated a fabricated, constructed nature of reality. They developed the artificial, politically informed structure in their film production, but also analysed it. For cinema, in their view, was a synthesis of the world, and, to an equal degree, an analysis of cinema itself.³⁴ This was achieved by the unmasking of their own filming and production process in their films. Vertov wanted the filmic technologies of fact fabrication to be made visible and available to the audience. This device through which film demystifies its own technique is a reflection Marx’s early definition of human perception as work of theory:

The eye has become a human eye when its object has become a human, social object, created by man and destined for him. The senses therefore become directly theoretical in practice.³⁵

It is exactly such a reality – a world articulated through a technically equipped, politically engaged and conscious cine-gaze – that they were offering to the masses for re-appropriation, collective possession, and management. Such was the cinematic USSR in their work: a land which the proletarians were supposed to repossess or claim, once their vision had been equipped for cinematic seeing. It was a USSR as a hegemony of the seeing; it was a proletariat no longer blind, nor hypnotized, nor inebriated, but a visually-politically conscious proletariat.

(g) Thus, the Kino-Eye’s effort in developing film technology was, in the final analysis, aimed at the negation of film: cinematography was systematically demystified and disassembled as a field of expertise, as a work of art, and as a fiction. They were doing this not by unmasking film as a false reality, nor by implying the existence of a “genuine”, “true” reality somewhere else. On the contrary, the Kino-Eye radicalized the fabricated nature of reality: by driving film techniques to a limit, by opening up the secrets of film technologies, by demystifying filmic attractions and transforming film into an activist, interventionist, performative arena. The purpose of expanding film’s democratizing and emancipating potential was thus based on filmic self-denial. At the same time film acted as a ruthless colonizer when Vertov proclaimed the purpose of film: to *replace* (not simply enhance) human perception: “I am kino-eye. I create a man more perfect than Adam, I create thousands of different people...”³⁶ It is through the transformation of a human eye into a film camera that Vertov envisaged the elimination of the abyss between the world and its representation, between the film and its audience. This transformation corresponded to the transformation of the USSR into the filmic *One Sixth of the World*. On the one side of the screen, there were filmically created “more perfect Adams”, some of them posing, others watching. On the other side of the screen, there were other “more perfect Adams” sitting in the movie theatre, equipped with a filmic gaze, and also watching. The camera was offering the audience a possibility of total identification with its own mechanical vision, which was the condition *sine qua non* in the film’s program of social mobilization.

³⁴ Dziga Vertov. The Birth of Kino-Eye. Annette Michelson (ed.) *Kino-Eye: the Writings of Dziga Vertov*, p. 41

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. xv.

³⁶ Dziga Vertov. The Council of Three. *Ibid.*, p. 17

*“A Sixth Part of the World is more than a film, than what we usually understand by the word “film” (...) A Sixth Part of the World is somewhere beyond the boundaries of these definitions; it is already the next stage after the concept of “cinema” itself (...) “This film has, strictly speaking, no “viewers” (...) since all the working people of the USSR (130-140 million of them) are not viewers but participants in this film. The very concept of this film and its whole construction are now resolving in practice the most difficult theoretical question of the eradication of the boundary between viewers and spectacle. A Sixth Part of the World cannot have critical opponents or critical supporters within the borders of the USSR, since both the opponents and the supporters are also participants in the film. (...) Our slogan is: All citizens of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics from 10 to 100 years old must see this work. By the tenth anniversary of October there must not be a single Tungus who has not seen A Sixth Part of the World.”*³⁷

This was how the Soviet “spiritual automaton” (Gilles Deleuze) was constructed by and in film, a project as daring as it was dangerous, given Benjamin’s prediction of the way “spiritual automatons” thus assembled can be first depoliticized and then used by the militarist state for the instigation of world wars. Let us be reminded that Walter Benjamin, in his review referred to above, evaluated *One Sixth of the World* as an attempt at “the recolonization of the periphery that *misfired*”.

Still, not only Vertov but the whole project of the USSR as we know it ultimately “misfired” in a colossal, catastrophic way, sixty years after the release of the film. *One Sixth of the World* is, indeed, as Dziga Vertov says, *a film that is more than film*: by including the whole of the multi-million population of the USSR, the film itself becomes its depicted reality. *One Sixth of the World* is not a picture *about* the USSR – it *is* the USSR. How, then, is this USSR made; how is its facticity fabricated? This question, again, is a question about the USSR “misfiring” in general, the collapse of its hegemony. I am trying to anticipate what happened quite recently in Vertov’s pioneering work. Below, I will approach an answer to this question by concentrating on the conceptual structure of Vertov’s USSR-narration and, for this purpose, use the published text of the film’s inter-titles.³⁸ These inter-titles are not only interesting as work of poetic creation (which they in fact were, and thus provoked many accusations against Vertov for the insincerity of his proclaimed aim of making film wholly without “literature”). I am using them for the purposes of revealing Vertov’s *strategies* in representing the USSR – i.e., as already pointed out, the film’s strategies in *becoming and performing* the USSR.

Becoming the USSR: “You, the Owners of the Soviet Land...”

...wide-open eyes, hypnotized by the cheerful emotion of construction and victory ...³⁹

The film is divided into six chapters, each of them adding a new dimension of Soviet reality but, at the same time, adding a new aspect of cinematic analysis; a new modality to the filmic statement that expresses the essence of the Soviet “one sixth of the world”. Thus, the composition of the narration is circular and linear at the same time. The circularity is seen in the (almost obsessive) repetition of the structure of the film phrase, the sequence: the camera visits a

³⁷ *A Sixth Part of the World (A Conversation with Dziga Vertov)*. Tsivian, Yuri (ed.), *Lines of Resistance: Dziga Vertov and the Twenties*, pp. 182-184.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.187-193.

³⁹ Tsivian, Yuri (ed.), *Lines of Resistance: Dziga Vertov and the Twenties*, p. 186.

new, “exotic” place (like Central Asia or the Far North) – it concentrates on a new, “exotic” *habitus* (ethnic costumes and rituals). At the end the focus shifts from the “exotic” to the universal in the Soviet people, irrespective of the geographic or cultural distance between them. This universality is that all the characters being filmed are involved in *work*. Work, the subject’s concentration on the work done, and the variety of work performed – ploughing, weaving, baking, milking, building, fishing, breast-feeding – is implemented by the eternal return in the work of the camera: wherever the lens turns, behind the “exoticism” of habits and ways, it invariably identifies the principle that subjects all those widely varying situations to the effects of the same force of social renovation: production.

The second, non-circular, evolutionary movement of Vertov’s filmic narration shows itself in the gradual movement of the modalities of his statements. The awareness of work’s central and unifying, empowering role, does not appear as an insight but becomes an increasingly complex statement about the role of work and working people in “the one sixth of the world”. In every new chapter, Vertov returns to the representation of work situations and elaborates on them, adding depth and precision to the main thesis of the film: “you, the owners of the Soviet land / hold in your hands a sixth part of the world”.⁴⁰

The elaboration of this thesis begins with an aerial view: the film opens with the footage of a plane and the landscape under its wings (the footage was incidentally “appropriated” from a German documentary and, technically speaking, has nothing to do with the “one sixth”). The film opens as a cinematic map; the immense landscape beneath the airplane is flat and non-differentiated with regard to the life that inhabits it. In his review of Vertov’s film Walter Benjamin mentions that maps of the USSR at that time were the trendiest, decorative detail: they adorned Moscow’s public spaces in abundance, beside hammer-and-sickle emblems and portraits of Lenin. *One Sixth of the World* starts as a filmic cartography, when the camera descends to look more closely at the faces and the hands of the working people, and turns into an encyclopaedia of Soviet labour, a poetic archive of its forces of production. Still later, the film becomes articulated to such an extent that it assumes the function of a political manifesto, a statement of future purposes – this ultimate articulation takes place in the last chapter of the film, where the inter-titles are all quotations from Stalin’s speeches. Here, the language of Stalin, as well as his face, becomes a new unifying force, a symbol and self-representation of the USSR: its map, its encyclopaedia, and the most perfect machine through which the USSR expands beyond the one sixth of the world, into the capitalist West and the colonial East.

In every chapter, there is a central thesis expressed in its visuality and supported by the poetic inter-titling. In the opening chapter, in keeping with the already established Soviet canon, Vertov seeks to represent the moral superiority of the USSR over the colonizing, exploiting and rotten West. The key word is *vizhu* (‘I see’). The camera unmask the bourgeoisie by its omnipotent gaze; it is a witness and a judge at the same time. There is no concealing the ugly truth under capitalist glamour (the “glamour” was incidentally borrowed from another filmmaker’s documentary about Europe, in parts staged with the help of Vertov’s friends, and in part filmed at the Moscow circus). The all-seeing witnessing/judging camera reveals capitalist vices by addressing every bourgeois individual personally: “I see you / and you / and you /

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 189, the slashes represent boundaries of the inter-titles as interrupted by untitled visual sequences.

it is you I see / (...) the toys / the guns / hatred / cramps / on the verge of its historical perishing / Capital / is having fun”.⁴¹

Chapter two develops this strategy of personal address, now to Soviet life. One could call this film fragment a *vocative geography* of the USSR. Flying over from the extreme north to the extreme south, penetrating deep into the desert, the mountains, the taiga, or the tundra, the camera shows its character in action while the inter-title addresses him or her directly: “you / in Dagestan villages / you in a Siberian virgin forest (...) you / you Tatars / you / you Buriats / Uzbeks / Kalmyks / Khakass / mountaineers of the Caucasus”⁴² and so on. None of these “yous” to whom the film appeals in such a personal manner, no matter how “exotic”, is merely an exhibit in some Soviet imperial museum. “You” is the producer: “you with your grapes / you with your rice / (...) and you who use your feet to do your laundry (...) / you / who are up to your knees in grain”⁴³ Significantly, the film audience, the producer of what Marx called “sensuous work”, performs as an addressee of the film’s vocative geography: “and you that are sitting in this auditorium”.⁴⁴ These appellations are crowned with the politico-economic statement towards which the visual and verbal poetics were working: “*you, the owners of the Soviet land / hold in your hands a sixth part of the world*”.

The politico-economic geography of the USSR thus produced is further developed in chapter three through the elaboration of the figure of collective ownership: the key word is *vashe*, ‘yours’. When the camera explores the dimensions of the USSR, its natural and political space, it moves, again, not in a linear fashion, but jumping in colossal intervals over the whole of the land from its one extremity towards another: “From the Kremlin / to the borders of China / from the Matochkin Shar / to Bukhara”.⁴⁵ *Vashe* (‘yours’) is attributed to a whole archive of goods and resources to be found in the destinations of these cinematic leaps; the USSR is not a “*where*”, but a “*wherever*” and an “*everywhere*”: wherever the camera moves, it finds new resources for the film audience to become aware and partake of: “all yours / your factories / your plants / your oil / your cotton / and sheep / wool / wool / wool / your butter / fish / your flax / your tobacco”.⁴⁶

Chapter four, formally exploring the routes of Soviet export (which was originally *Gostorg*’s rather modest idea in commissioning the film to Vertov) in fact becomes a visual *fugue*, an interplay between the movements and motives of communication, transport, transpositions, and transfers; this is a USSR that is itself motion and transition, a USSR that is a complete metaphor of itself. It is the driving force of the USSR, its colossal libido, an insatiable desire of change and exchange: “along dirt roads / along mountain paths / by caravans of camels (...) and there / where roads do not exist at all / where in the span of a hundred miles / you may not encounter a single soul / through severe frosts (...) they are moving...”⁴⁷

Chapter five is an archive of things that are *vse esche* (‘still’, in the meaning of ‘not yet’, cf. the ‘not-yet-sameness’ as discussed in the beginning of this essay): the remnants of patriarchal, pre-socialist prejudice, retardedness (*otstalost*) and various forms of “opium for the

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 187.

⁴² Ibid., p. 188.

⁴³ Ibid., p.189.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 190.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

people”. Here, Vertov showed quite rare footage of pagan religious and ethnic rituals that particularly enraged his opponents who accused him (not quite without grounds) of exoticizing, ethnographic voyeurism. In the meantime, in this chapter he is exploring the dialectics of “already” (yours) and “still” or “not yet” (yours). In Vertov, the “retarded” agent of “retarded” rituals is not yet a “you”, not yet a concrete addressee with residence in a concrete place (“you / in Dagestan villages”), but an anonymous “someone”, who can be occasionally discovered in an anonymous “someplace”:

Someplace people still plough the field with a stick / someplace women still cover their faces (...) / someone is still counting his rosary (...) / someplace the shaman is dancing / there are still places / observing the ritual of woman’s purification.⁴⁸

These are the people from the past, and it is not to them that Vertov appeals, not are they sitting in the auditorium: “not as yet”.

Finally, in chapter six, he formulates the solution to the fragmentation of the multiple “you”, as well as the solution to the “not as yet” problem. The variety of the local finds a new unifying force. One of the key words here is, again, *vizhu* (“I see”), a dialectical return to the beginning of the film which marks a radical renovation and a rebirth of the eye. It is a qualitatively different sight that opens up to the renovated gaze:

Another woman educates the women of the East / young Communist Samoyed is reading the newspaper *Northener* / Buriats and Mongols are reading the newspaper *Buriat-Mongol Pravda* / Mongol children become members of “The Young Pioneers.”⁴⁹

Another key word is “plant”: “the Volkhov electric plant / the plants / more plants.”⁵⁰ Finally, a renewed, firm statement of the will: *khotim* (“we want to”). This is where a long quotation from Stalin, and the footage representing Stalin, are included in the film. Broken by visual sequences between the titles, Stalin’s speech reads like a poem in the popular Maiakovskiyite / Walt Whitmanesque style. Vertov’s titles manipulate Stalin’s speech, subjecting the prosaic repetitive style of the Leader to the poetic taste of the film-maker. Stalin’s face is also manipulated: it is used rhetorically, as the crowning vignette, the most powerful figure of expression.

Thus, the film does not only construct its own USSR; it does not only populate it with its own characters and viewers, but it also supplies the USSR thus obtained with its own, cinematically manipulated Stalin. Given the Kino-Eye’s filming principles, it is a Stalin who can be assembled but who can also be disassembled, a Stalin who can be synthesized under the camera’s gaze but who can also be analyzed – in short, it is a critically deconstructible Stalin. The camera demonstrates its ultimate control over Stalin by making him articulate his statements so that the film may better express its own cinematic program. It is a statement of collective will and that of sovereignty: Stalin’s slogan, “*we want to produce by our own means*”, is repeated several times in the inter-titling throughout the chapter:

... we want to produce by our own means / not only the chintz / but also the machines needed to produce chintz / we want to produce by our own means / not only the tractors / but also the ma-

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 191.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 192.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

chines that produce tractors (...the workers of the West and the nations of the East ...) will flow into the channel of unified Socialist industry / into the channel / of UNIFIED / SOCIALIST / INDUSTRY.⁵¹

One Sixth of the World and the Other Five Sixths: Vertov, Postcoloniality, and Us

Now, where is the place, in my excursion across the *One Sixth*..., for the USSR's Western Europe, or EU's Eastern Europeans, the ones for whose benefit my project was undertaken? Vertov's work does not seem to be of direct relevance to the Baltic, or to the former Eastern bloc countries. They came to be sovietized later on, mostly after the war, when not only Vertov's cultural hegemony had been long taken off the Soviet agenda, but at a time when even Stalin's own hegemonism was going through a crisis. The regime therefore chose brutal force in the suppression of its new territories but no longer came forward with any concrete theoretical "suggestions". Stalin's last contributions to Marxist theory, his *Marxism and the Questions of Linguistics* (1950)⁵² and his last treatise, *Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR* (1951) dealt with questions of world order, the problems of material and symbolic exchange on the global, "macro-level", he was no longer interested in the problems of local cultural and historical difference. By this time, as George Bataille remarks in his critique of Stalinism, the Soviet Union had developed into a state of "imperial socialism" without concern for the "national":

The Soviet Union (...) is a framework in which any nation can be inserted: It could later incorporate a Chilean Republic in the same way as a Ukrainian Republic is already incorporated.⁵³

For Bataille, who was writing this prediction some time between 1946 and 1949, the USSR, was thus a *post-national empire*. For Vertov's visions of the USSR to come – the USSR ultimately abducted by Stalin — it was never an empire but, definitely and resolutely, something entirely different from a national identity. Vertov did a lot to construct the USSR the way Bataille saw it 20 years later, so that any nation "could be inserted" in its horizontality. Vertov's horizontality, however, needs to be carefully considered in its *superficial likeness* to Stalin's imperial indifference to difference. Bataille's analysis of the USSR thus gives us one additional, and very serious reason, to consider the postcolonial ex-USSR in greater detail, with an emphasis on producing a difference between things that *look alike*.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 192-193, capitalized by Vertov, at least as in that version of the film a copy of which I have in my possession. – IS.

⁵² Sandomirskaja, Irina, "Jazyk-Stalin: 'Marksizm i voprosy iazykoznaniiia' kak lingvisticheskii povорот vo vse-lennoi SSSR". *Landslide of the Norm: Language Culture in Post-Soviet Russia*, edited by Ingunn Lunde & Tine Roesen, (Slavica Bergensia 6), Bergen 2006

⁵³ Bataille, George, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*. Vol. 1. Consumption. New York: Zone Books, 1991 p. 151.

⁵⁴ Apart from a discussion of Bataille, a methodological critical dialogue with another *enfant terrible* of philosophy and theory, Frantz Fanon, would be extremely useful in the business of differentiating between likenesses. With his theory of colonialism as the *mimetic performance* of colonization by the subaltern (instead of the enforcement of colonization by the colonizer as in Anglo-Saxon political theory), Fanon is indispensable for the postcolonial critique of likenesses. His work is totally ignored, as far as I know, by post-Soviet studies. I am leaving Fanon in a footnote, just as I did when I mentioned Benjamin's (also performative and mimetic) theory of distraction. I mean primarily a critical rereading of Fanon's classical work from 1952, *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 2000. I hope to be able to return to this discussion elsewhere.

The effective sovietization of the Baltic states and Eastern Europe occurred after Stalin's death, under Khrushchev's "vegetarian" rule, after his half-hearted destalinization in 1956. Apart from the outbursts of utter violence in the repression of open resistance (the Baltic guerilla, the Polish resistance, revolts in Budapest and Berlin, the Prague Spring), this sovietization was effected through bureaucratic, system-based, cybernetic technologies of planning, control, and management. The role of these institutional actions are largely underestimated in post-Soviet research.⁵⁵ This happened when the revolutionizing age of film was over; it was already the era of television. The demontage of this now televised, no longer filmic USSR – the revolutionary events at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s – were also performed by the people who gathered around, and fought for, TV stations and towers. No one ever saw anything like the dramatic events at the Vilnius TV centre in 1989, or those in Ostankino in 1993, in the vicinity of a film studio.⁵⁶

So, why Vertov?

For post-Soviet scholarship, Vertov is, of course, an important witness. We like to use his pictures as historical documents, as living illustrations of the every-day life of the 1920s. This is of course abuse rather than any "usage". Besides, to believe that an artist and intellectual like Vertov could ever be *used* for any practical purpose at all is a misconception. Even Stalin did not succeed in using Vertov; instead, he found himself used by Vertov, as merely an element – though a privileged one – in Vertov's archive of fabricated facts.

What is more important is Vertov the political activist, a theorist and performer of resistance. By studying his techniques we learn more about, and of, actionism: Vertov was in fact a pre-situationist situationist, whose analysis is comparable to that of Guy Debord and Raoul Vaneigem as developed in their street performances in the 1950s and 60s.⁵⁷ Given the importance of their work for the theory and practice of the politics of space as we find it in today's urban movements, ecological movements, global activism, and internet activism, we cannot forget that Vertov's was one of the first practical and theoretical contributions to the strategies of reclaiming space, as his camera performed rather than depicted the immense space of the USSR. Hence we understand the meaning of Vertov in the construction of a postcolonial world: today it finds itself stitched together into a virtual totality by television and the internet. These media leap from one extremity over to another and produce the world as an interval, in the same way as Vertov's leaping camera produced the interval of the USSR. Such "interval realities" have to be thoroughly considered if we want to produce a postcolonial theory that may include the post-Soviet territories.

⁵⁵ See, however, Egle Rindzeviciute. "From Desovietising towards Governmentality: Perceptions of Governance in the Interviews with the Leaders of Lithuanian Cultural Organisations". Paper presented at the Conference *From Orientalism to Postcoloniality* (Södertörn University College, Sweden 2006 04 27-30); Egle Rindzeviciute. "Mapping Technologies of Control: Cybernetics and State Cultural Policy in Lithuania". Paper presented at the *Fourth International Conference on Cultural Policy Research ICCPR 2006* (Vienna, Austria, 2006 07 12-16).

⁵⁶ See a witness account *cum* critical analysis of the role of the televisual media in the collapse of the USSR in Buck-Morss, Susan, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*. Cambridge, Mass. and London: the MIT Press, 2002, pp. 260-278.

⁵⁷ On situationism in the context of the post-war practices and theories of performing space, see Hellström, Maria, *Steal This Place: The Aesthetics of Tactical Formlessness and "The Free Town of Christiania"*. Doctoral Thesis. Alnarp: Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, 2006, pp. 106-173.

Vertov is the foundation of today's film and media theory. No less important is Vertov's contribution in critical methodology of the humanities at large. He pre-visions the development of poststructuralist critical methods in the humanities, a foundation which both area studies and postcolonial theory rest on. His contributions are self-critical film camera work, a montage replete with reflexivity, a filmic statement that is aware of its political agency, offering as effective analyses of various realities as syntheses of them. The critical possibilities of film in Vertov are best investigated and performed in *A Man with a Movie Camera*. This film is a pure theory of culture: by deconstructing the filmic image, it teaches us how to apply critical instruments in our own scholarly media, how academic interpretation is to be performed to achieve a critical consciousness about the world and about itself. A deconstructing methodology, Vertov's cinematography teaches an important lesson to the academic scholars of culture in general. He is by no means film history.

Finally, Vertov is a political philosopher: he makes his films instances of practical democracy and investigations in the governmentality of vision.⁵⁸ The philosophical value of his experimentation – the construction of political subjectivity and the practical implementation of horizontal politics in filmic visuality – is yet to be fully accounted for. With the collapse of the Soviet imperialist hegemonism, Vertov's thinking in terms of cultural hegemony is only beginning to be understood, but he points the direction for us to become aware of the complexity of all things Soviet – and, by implication, of the complexity of all things post-Soviet, which complexity, after the collapse of the USSR, has been growing in a geometric progression. While creating a conceptual space for Baltic and East European postcoloniality, it might make sense to consider the possibility to, from now on, use designations like *Soviet hegemony*, *Soviet citizenship*, and even *the USSR*, in the plural.

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