

**the  
collegium  
papers VI**

**the pordenone  
silent film festival  
sacile 2004**





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le giornate del cinema muto

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**le giornate del cinema muto 2004**  
**the collegium papers VI**

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## **preface**

The sixth annual collection of "Collegium Papers" is, we feel, the best vindication to date of what we have set out to achieve in the concentrated experience of the Collegium, contained within the single week of the Giornate del Cinema Muto. The writers have all responded vitally and directly to the discoveries of the Giornate – most notably the revelation of Dziga Vertov. Several have managed to explore quite new paths of research. The writing throughout is direct, personal, lively, readable and liberated from cliché and jargon. In this respect it is noteworthy that seven of the twelve contributors are writing in a language that is not our own; and in every case the occasional echoes from a foreign idiom enrich rather than impair their expressiveness (after all, Joseph Conrad luckily never quite expunged the Polish accent from his English writing). Any reader will recognise one or two items at least which can be reckoned permanent additions to the literature of film.

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jon davies

## vertov nation

*"Man with a Movie Camera is in consequence  
not a film at all: it is a snapshot album."  
– John Grierson*

*"A country without documentaries is like  
a family without a photo album."  
– Patricio Guzman*

The Dziga Vertov retrospective at the 2004 Festival provided a perfect opportunity for a number of historians and scholars to reappraise and debate the work of one of the world's most influential film artists. Viewing Vertov's oeuvre chronologically gave spectators the chance to trace the development of his style and see how certain themes are elaborated throughout his career. In the very first *Kino-Nedelia* there is a scene that Yuri Tsivian draws our attention to in his programme [notes](#)<sup>1</sup> that struck me as quintessentially Vertov. It also succinctly represents two kinds of subject/camera interaction, the dynamic that I believe forms the heart of Vertov's work and these reflections on it. We see two merchants selling homemade wooden toys: one is in the background, occupied by customers, facing away from the camera and occasionally turning slightly to glimpse the action occurring behind him, where the second vendor is only partly visible in the foreground. This second vendor shows off several of the toys to the camera, acknowledging the presence of prospective buyers among the newsreel audience. While there are potential customers surrounding the merchants, this demonstration is aimed strictly at the camera. The hand-carved toys include a row of soldiers that move in unison, a horse pulling a sled, a mounted soldier and a dog biting a man's bottom. The elements that give this scene such a joyful, eccentric air are that the first merchant's back is turned to the proceedings, the whimsical quality of the toys on display, and of course the crowd of onlookers (who have their own range of interactions with the camera). Together, these details produce an unmistakable sense of mischievous play. Here we see two men, one either unaware or not acknowledging the camera and one not only aware of but performing to the camera, and the dynamic tension that exists between these two forms of interaction. I would like to take this opportunity to discuss some of the more memorable moments of subject/camera interaction in Vertov's cinema with the goal of showing the depth and range of the human community on view in his films and how these moments contribute to building a global network of proletarian/peasant spectators. This paper is a small attempt at appraising the status of the human – "caught," represented, by the cinema machine, of course – in Vertov's work. If one were to go by one of Vertov's earliest manifestos, "WE: Variant of a Manifesto" from 1922, one would be led to believe that the human subject had no place in the Kinoks' practice: "The 'psychological' prevents man from being as precise as a stopwatch; it interferes with his desire for kinship with the machine. In an art of movement we have no reason to devote our particular attention to contemporary man. The machine makes us ashamed of man's inability to control

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<sup>1</sup> "Do not miss the close-up of a handsome homemade mechanical toy which a boy toy-vendor demonstrates to prospective buyers" (30).

himself, but what are we to do if electricity's unerring ways are more exciting to us than the disorderly haste of active men and the corrupting inertia of passive ones? [...]

*For his inability to control his movements, WE temporarily exclude man as a subject for film. Our path leads through the poetry of machines, from the bungling citizen to the perfect electric man. [...]* The new man, free of unwieldiness and clumsiness, will have the light, precise movements of machines, and he will be the gratifying subject of our films" (in Michelson 8-9).

We may initially scoff at this condemnation of "man" when some of the most loved and affecting scenes in Vertov's career are of people, in all their imperfections. However, the first thing we must remember is that this was written in his *Kino-Pravda* days; Ian Christie warned me that we must be lenient with the inconsistencies in Vertov's rhetoric, not taking the Kinok manifestos literally as this was an era of "factions and polemic." Also, as Oliver Gaycken pointed out to me, this statement is not so much a denunciation of the "bungling citizen" as the announcement of a plan of action for transforming humanity through the cinema, that most astounding of machines. Here he plans the union of the very elements that make his cinema so compelling: rigorous non-fiction formal and technical experimentation and the "unwieldy," "clumsy" ordinary people that make up life-as-it-is. Much of the impact of Vertov's portraits, if you will, comes from their stubbornly normal, mundane and everyday qualities, their imperfect, lumpy, embodied humanness rather than any kind of perfection, precision, control or order as embodied by the camera.

Over the course of *Kino-Eye*, Annette Michelson's collection of Vertov's writings, we can see a marked transformation in Vertov's appreciation of the importance of the human subject for his filmmaking practice. Delving into Michelson's collection past "WE," we increasingly find the "psychological" creeping in, despite Vertov's frequent polemics against its predominance in fiction filmmaking. It is impossible not to detect the traces of psychological investigation in this diary entry from March 22, 1941: "The joy of truth, but not of apparent truth. The joy of seeing in depth, through makeup, through acting, through a role, through a mask. To see weeping through laughter, through pomposity – paltriness, through bravery – cowardice, through politeness – hatred, through a mask of contemptuous indifference – the concealed passion of love. The joy of doing away with 'appearance,' of reading thoughts and not words" (238).

No matter how much Vertov may wish to stick to a materialist view of the world, by condensing our attention, by selecting one face or gesture for our contemplation, his camera cannot help but open up the human subject to psychological and emotional interpretations. In fact, the final document in Michelson's collection (though not the latest, chronologically), "Little Anya: A Film Portrait," written in 1943 according to Vlada Petric', could easily pass as a fiction film script detailing the experiences of a young girl during the Great Patriotic War, although I'm sure it would bear no resemblance to the illusionist fakery Vertov constantly derided. Finally, in a piece plainly titled "About Love for the Living Person" from 1958, he claims that "everything I have done in cinema was connected, directly or indirectly, with my persistent effort to reveal the thinking of the 'living person.' Sometimes that person was the film's author-director, not shown on the screen" (in Michelson 156).

What can we glean from this shift in Vertov's rhetoric? Seth Feldman has characterized this change as a moving away from one artistic movement towards another: "it is the difference between an avant garde artist still linked to conventional Italian Futurism and a Soviet artist who, with a grasp of the principles of Constructivism, is applying his medium's potential not only to a technological interpretation of society but also to its social structuring" (*Evolution* 130). One could also argue that throughout Vertov's work, the machine is always in the service of humanity, and the new electric man he speaks of in the early manifesto was simply the worker freed from capitalism circa 1917 who could now forge a new relationship with his machine. If the physical transformation of the new man that Vertov predicted is overstated in "WE," his description of the people in his films by the time of the 1936 article "On the Organization of a Creative Laboratory" is perhaps clearer in its terms: "Man freed from capitalist slavery. Man freed from the condition of the 'robot.' Man freed from humiliation, from hunger, unemployment, poverty, ruin" (in Michelson 137).

As I suggested earlier, a major factor that I see as responsible for the profoundly moving quality of the everyday citizens in Vertov's films is the wide range and variety of his subjects' awareness or unawareness of his, or rather Mikhail Kaufman's, camera. As Petric' has pointed out, since the cinema is now a social actor, when Vertov shows the many different ways that people interact with

the camera – from ignorance to shyness to aggression to acting out and everything in between – these reactions are just another aspect of responsibly documenting life-as-it-is. How comrade so-and-so behaves in front of the camera is a life-fact like any other, though one that contributes volumes to the films' self-referentiality and "bonding" together of viewers, a process to which I will return later. The cameraman is a person on the street like any other, and those he meets must deal with the camera's formidable presence.

Because the interaction between subject and camera plays such a major role in what I have perhaps recklessly dubbed Vertov's portraits, I would like to chart briefly the development of the term "Life Caught Unawares." After some research into this oft-repeated Vertovian maxim, I would agree with Tsvian and his translator Julian Graffy that the term as translated is misleading and should be replaced by the more appropriate "life off-guard." It is undeniable that Vertov and the Kinoks actively sought to record people without their knowledge throughout their career, which was difficult due to the large size and noise of the camera and the relatively private activities that Vertov sought to document alongside more public events. While there are several examples of this wish expressed in *Kino-Eye*,<sup>2</sup> the most candid statement on the issue is from a diary entry dated March 20, 1927: "Your first failures. People stare at you, urchins surround you, your subjects peer into the camera. You gain experience. You use all sorts of techniques to remain unnoticed, to do your work without preventing others from doing theirs. Every attempt to film people who are walking, dining, working invariably ends in failure. Girls begin to primp; men make 'Fairbanks' or 'Conrad Veidt' faces. They all smile affably for the camera. Sometimes traffic stops [...] Life does not wait, people move about" (in Michelson 168).

Tsvian, in his commentary on the *Man with the Movie Camera* DVD, states that "Life Caught Unawares" is the process of recording all life as it unfolds, whether those on film are aware of and acknowledge the presence of the camera or not. In this view, the emphasis is more on the "caught" than on the "unawares," which fits with his suggestion of using the term "off-guard" instead. Philip Rosen reminded me that any use of such a term must be carefully historicized, and luckily Feldman has done just that. He suggests that "Life Caught Unawares" evolved in three stages over Vertov's career. Originally it simply referred to the "inclusion of images of the common man going about his business on the newsreel screen" which Vertov began doing in *Kino-Nedelia*. Starting with *Kino-Pravda*, "Life Caught Unawares" incorporated the use of hidden-camera shots" which was part of Vertov's "assertion of the camera's right to be anywhere." Finally, with the feature *Kino-Glaz*, "Life Caught Unawares" began to mean "the acceptance of the film-maker and the film-making process as part of the daily activity of Soviet society," a fellow worker among workers (*Guide* 30). In this historical trajectory, the ultimate meaning of "Life Caught Unawares" defines an interactive model of filmmaking after earlier attempts at more purist forms of observational documentary both conspicuous and inconspicuous.

There are many memorable moments of camera consciousness in Vertov's oeuvre. In *Lines of Resistance* Tsvian mentions Ukrainian politician Rakovski tipping his hat, the Socialist Balabanova looking shy, Lenin's gesturing to the cameraman to pan away, and an unnamed man looking coyly into the camera while receiving an outdoor shave. Tsvian sees these moments as the heart of "life off-guard": "It is fun to watch valiant warriors and serious diplomats or politicians portrayed in *Kino-Weeks* become bashful, or start joking, or strike a pose. Later this practice would grow into a theory known as 'life off-guard' or 'life unawares'" (42). While some critics have attempted to discern political judgments on Vertov's part in terms of how progressive people's reactions to the camera are (e.g. when the wealthy ladies in *Man with a Movie Camera* mimic the camera's cranking it means they are uncomfortable with the camera, a characteristic of their decadent distance from machines), this strategy tends to result in the most exhausting interpretive gymnastics with critics trying to fit very subjective understandings of very subtle gestures and looks into a schema of worker = camera

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<sup>2</sup> As late as 1929 Vertov proclaimed: "The best method is candid, concealed shooting [...] consider filming in which someone's attention must be diverted" ("From the History of the Kinoks," in Michelson 100). Also see their list of documentary shooting techniques outlined in 1924's "From the Kinoks Field Manual" in Michelson 162-3.

comfort, bourgeoisie = camera awkwardness. It is interesting to note that Vertov's representation of the bourgeoisie is often accomplished through methods that deviate from "life off-guard." When representing the foreign capitalist nation of America and its lapdogs England and France in *Kino-Pravda 14*, the capitalist citizens are simply not given any face at all: they are denied the privilege of figural representation given to the Soviets. Instead, America is represented by its skyscrapers, and England and France are represented by some "lacquered shoes" eagerly doing a servile tap dance for the good ol' USA (Petrovskii in Tsivian 67). In other cases Vertov uses the persuasive tropes of the despised fiction film, notably caricature, as his weapon, as in the debauched bourgeois dancing scenes in *One Sixth of the World*.

One could argue that in a fiction film, the illusion is maintained by the performers never acknowledging the spectators, by pretending the camera does not exist. By having so many people clearly aware that the camera is present and in some cases playing to it or staring into it, Vertov is resisting this impulse to construct a closed, perfect world in a way that his hidden camera tricks and distractions do not. It seems that the technical difficulties the Kinoks encountered – basically the problem of people noticing the camera – in fact contributed to their radical experimentation with non-fiction rather than taking away from it.

Vertov also democratized representation, in a way, by the sheer plainness of the people on screen. There are very few instances when Vertov celebrates a masterful, toned, some might say fascist body, the kind that doesn't look into the camera. For example, the athletes in *Man with a Movie Camera* easily rival any of those in Leni Riefenstahl's *Olympia*. However, in a similar montage of sports footage from the All-Russia Olympiad in *Kino-Pravda 10*, Vertov includes just as many – if not more – crashes and defeats as glorious successes. These scenes are quite remarkable for embracing the flawed and inadequate at an event designed to transcend just such qualities in favour of disciplined purity and perfection. The blatantly failing bodies in this newsreel stand in stark contrast to the many monuments we see erected in his newsreels. The monument is a cold, dead, eternal symbol designating an officially sanctioned memory for the public's contemplation or passive tolerance. They do not move, they do not have to decide how they will present themselves to the camera. By contrast, Vertov's citizens live and breathe in their cinematographic portraits, they are a community and not a towering icon (with the glaring exception of Lenin, of course, but it would be difficult to argue that Vertov's camera does not humanize even this most venerated official). Even the austere and solemn members of the Party elite have to reckon with the camera's presence – and choosing to stand stock-still is nevertheless a concession to its power. The deifying of Lenin in statements such as "He wiped off tears from women's faces, this is what we call Lenin" in *Three Songs of Lenin* shows him to be present in anything and everything, even in the dregs of the rank and file, the soiled and the mundane. Tsivian's witty commentary during the festival, consisting of an occasionally ironic reading of the intertitles interspersed with extra-diegetic information on the people we were watching had a similar function of bringing down to earth the bureaucrats represented on screen, announcing that a certain official would soon be dating Mussolini, for example.

One need only think of *Kino-Glaz* for examples of this democratization of representation, the film that inaugurated the most developed phase of "Life Caught Unawares" according to Feldman. The pioneer children in *Kino-Glaz* are memorable not only for their patriotic allegiance to Soviet principles and fondness for obediently marching in formation but also for the dynamism and energy they bring to the film as exuberant young kids. For example, who could forget the pioneer who must stand on tiptoes to put up a poster and the fellow (the same one?) who posts one upside-down. Clearly Bolshevik brio is more important than precision and perfection. Details like these bring the humour of human fallibility and foibles into what could have been a dry exercise in training the young in their revolutionary ABC's. And of course we cannot omit the scene featuring an assortment of patients at a mental hospital who act out for the camera in a kind of grotesque parody of cinematic performance. One man peers out from over a newspaper, makes faces, and an intertitle screams "memento mori" in a bit of photographic criticism that would do Roland Barthes proud. We see a wide range of hysterical gesticulations, flailing, theatrical poses and statements made directly to camera by a large number of male and female inmates. One could argue that here their pathologies prevent them from putting on the polite façade of "don't look directly into the camera."

In fact, they relentlessly draw attention to the camera and to the process of being filmed, they are performers one and all. Also, in *Kino-Glaz* there are three close-ups of the human eye, but none belong to Vertov: two belong to mental patients and one to a street kid waking up early in the film. Here, the jumpy, even crazed eyes of these three marginalized members of Soviet society stand in for Vertov, the spinning top of his name visually echoed in the eyes' reeling and darting movements. In what seems like a very concerted way he is aligning his eye with theirs (which led to some teasing from Vertov's opponents, see Tsivian 121). The homeless child's newly opened eye signifies their sudden wakefulness and state of alert, while the mental patients also seem to have a greater sense of awareness and sensitivity to the world around them than anyone else (though perhaps Vertov was distraught by how easily they transform real life into fiction through their hallucinations?). For people who so clearly "make Fairbanks and Conrad Veidt" faces, the patients certainly receive a lot of attention, both in terms of screen time and empathic identification, demonstrated and elicited.

The flip side of the foibles and idiosyncracies of Vertov's masses is that every human being in his films represents both a highly specific individual as well as the embodiment of all of the Soviet Union, or rather the entire global working class and peasantry. While each shot of Vertov's citizens is a "film-fact" in itself, there is a great cumulative effect when we see them juxtaposed with one another, as if Vertov is weaving a tapestry of diverse faces and figures. He seems to be attempting to document every Soviet citizen his camera can reach in an enormous family photo album, their shared "textures of life" laced inseparably together. John MacKay suggested that Vertov was faced with the problem of how to imagine the new, how to show the constructive side of Communism as persuasively as the destruction (the toppling of Czarist monuments, the humiliation of the clergy, the seizing of wealth). The answer is through the labour of the people, building, uniting, working together towards some as yet unrepresentable future. The people are stitched – edited – together, "bonded" as a means of bringing together everyone in the proletariat and peasantry through making every one visible to each other over long distances: to see how another works. Vertov's own example in "Kinopravda and Radiopravda" (1925) was that the textile worker should see his machine being built, the machine-builder should see the miner responsible for the plant's coal, and the miner should see the peasant producing his bread, and so on and so on (in Michelson 52). In their programme notes to *One Sixth of the World*, MacKay and Charles Musser state: "the 'visual bond' involves creating the (perceptual, conceptual, affective) sense of living in a single (though diverse) world, and acting as part of a common project [...] those moments when the human objects of our gaze return the glance, whether with sympathy, perplexity, coyness, or rage [play a vital role in this bonding process]" (57). One of the remarkable aspects of *One Sixth of the World* is how the wide variety of cultures in the Soviet Union can be united through their material labour: there is much more enthusiasm for the diversity of procedures for washing sheep than there is for "primitive" spiritual and religious rites, for example. Ismail Urazov did not mince words when he commented in 1926: "Was this not a miracle! You shave every other day, you go to the theatre, you ride on a bus – you stand at the other end of the cultural ladder – and *A Sixth Part of the World* has somehow managed distinctly and indisputably to link you with these people eating raw meat in the North (in Tsivian 185-6).

This bonding would be impossible without the cinema, a device linked to the communications rhetoric that would place it in a series of technological developments (the printing press, the photograph, the cinema, the internet) that finally bring people together into a global community. On a formal level, *Man with a Movie Camera* brings this bonding process to a whole new level by directing so much attention to how the camera catalyzes the new world into being. An early scene features the camera waking up a grubby young man sleeping in the street. The shot-reverse shot emphasizes a reciprocal relationship between the two: boy looks at camera, camera looks at boy. He scratches under his armpit, the camera's crank turns, he looks amusedly into the lens, making eyes and pulling his cap down. The camera movement and perspective also work to frame this encounter as a meeting of equals, except the camera is alert and awake and ready to go, not a loafer. This is also emphasized in the shot of a woman sleeping on a bench waking up and running away from Vertov's camera, with his eye superimposed over the lens. It is the cameraman, the cinema, who pushes others into action, but this woman has a far more hostile reaction to the camera than the

urchin. In the first editing scene in the film, we are given a sneak peek into the construction of the very film we are watching – literally seeing it being built – and it is noteworthy that the images being edited are primarily those of the children in the conjurer scene that we will see later. Michelson has suggested that their looks of surprise, delight and curiosity mirror our own as we watch Vertov the conjuror’s cinematic tricks in this landmark film. Here Vertov links in no uncertain terms the construction of his film through the editing of faces of Soviet citizens to the bonding process that cinema accomplishes in uniting together the global working class and peasantry. Sophie Kuppers-Lissitzky spoke about the film in 1929: “It matters to all of us – the whole wide world belongs to all of us – for all of us the child’s laughter, and the tears at the grave” (in Tsivian 359). Vertov’s desire to show real, everyday people instead of actors has had a major effect on film realism, whether in fiction or non-fiction cinemas. Vertov wrote repeatedly about the peasants’ responses of “coolness and distrust” when encountering any fictional presentation of their lives on the screen, no matter how superficially authentic. Vertov claims the peasants respond most enthusiastically (they “perk up”) to documentary images of other peasants, which they immediately recognize as real life (“Kino-Eye” in Michelson 60-1). For Vertov the preference for reality as opposed to playing is seen as a result of the peasants’ blessed ignorance of the “film-moonshine” of fiction cinema. But in the eighty-five years since Vertov’s travels with the agit-trains, perhaps the whole world is now drunk on the stars and scenarios of Hollywood and Bollywood moonshine. There has always been a desire for “real” representations, which manifests itself even in situations of the greatest consumption of dominant fiction cinema. Vertov was an early advocate for the importance of seeing the everyday working people in the cities and countryside who are “just like us.” In the work of filmmakers – all politically committed, often specifically to the working class – as diverse as Ken Loach, Peter Watkins and Frederick Wiseman (not to mention Italian neo-Realism and the contemporary Iranian cinema) we can see this pressing desire to present real bodies and real lives that stand in marked opposition to the dream factory fantasies of the ‘woods.

Thomas Tode’s documentary *In the Land of Cinema Veterans: A Film Expedition Around Dziga Vertov* perhaps says it best when the narrator suggests that Vertov wanted to show that the entire world had a soul. In recognizing ourselves in their faces, his images of Soviet citizens have an ineffable, almost supernaturally dynamic quality. Naum Kaufman said in 1928: “There are things in our time whose beauty Vertov was the first to be able to reveal in film, and we look at them through his eyes” (in Tsivian 296). The aura lent to a face captured by a camera is perhaps a secular kind of soul. When we look at Vertov’s portraits from the vantage point of our image-saturated society we are not only looking at the pioneers of communism but also the origins of the utopian political potential of film realism. Vertov’s proletarian portraits acknowledge the camera, are self-conscious, understand that they are being transformed into representations, images to be archived as memory and history.

“The film is made in such a way that you can’t take your eyes off it. The human memory is fragile; a great deal has been erased, has disappeared, but the screen leads the memory unwaveringly over the pot-holes of a forgotten road; it gives birth to half-decayed images, pictures, and events, where every person who is a citizen of the USSR has left a part of himself” – R., review of *Stride, Soviet*, February 8, 1927 (in Tsivian 165).

Thanks to John MacKay, Philip Rosen, Yuri Tsivian, Ian Christie, Annette Michelson, Oliver Gaycken and others for their comments during Dialogues, conversation or correspondence on the subject.

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vincent bohlinger

**intervals in sound and silence:  
two versions of *three songs of lenin***

Dziga Vertov's *Three Songs of Lenin* straddles a pivotal moment in Soviet film history. His first version of the film – the sound version of 1934 – received a public release on 1 November 1934, only two months before the All-Union Creative Conference of Workers in Soviet Cinema in January of 1935. In many ways, this Conference confirmed the end of the film industry's more tolerant experimental era, an era that had, to varying degrees, stretched back to the early to mid-twenties. Now, as the film industry lined up to follow the lead taken by the First Congress of Soviet Writers in adopting and promoting Socialist Realism as the singular aesthetic goal of the state, filmmakers like Vertov, Sergei Eisenstein, and Lev Kuleshov were once again singled out for extensive criticism. Whereas these filmmakers had long attempted to distinguish and promote their particular brand of cinematic practice from one another, they now found themselves lumped together under the more general – and damning – category of demonstrating cinematic goals contrary to those professed by the state. The slow transition to sound in the Soviet Union increasingly favoured a 'realistic' integration of sound and image within an overall push toward 'realism.' The January Conference, along with the First Moscow International Film Festival held later that winter, worked to establish a new model of Soviet filmmaking. Socialist Realist film was born, its premiere film being Georgii Vasiliev and Sergei Vasiliev's *Chapayev* (which, interestingly, had publicly opened just one week after *Three Songs of Lenin*).

Within this unfriendly political climate of 1935, Vertov oversaw the re-editing of *Three Songs of Lenin* into a silent version. The practice of re-editing a sound film into silent form was not unusual, as a large number of provincial theatres throughout the Soviet Union would not be equipped to handle sound until well after World War II (see Deriabin, catalogue of *Le Giornate del Cinema Muto*, p. 75). What was unusual, however, was the fact that Vertov himself chose to become involved in what would ordinarily be a lesser task. Perhaps he was in need of work, perhaps he welcomed the distraction, but perhaps he also savoured the opportunity to revisit and re-envision his material afresh. It is not too often that we have the opportunity to examine two versions of the same film, and so I aim to do just that. In the paragraphs that follow, I would first like to identify what I deem to be the major differences between these two versions, but then ultimately assert an overall similarity. While arguing that the two versions of *Three Songs of Lenin* are similar is certainly uncontroversial, I hope that this examination might better guide us to a demonstration of Vertov's cinematic practice, particularly his guiding editing principle: the theory of the interval.

To begin, it should be noted that neither the sound nor the silent version of *Three Songs of Lenin* currently available is Vertov's initial realization. In 1938, he was required to re-edit both versions in order to eliminate references to Soviet officials rapidly being eliminated in Stalin's purges (see Deriabin, *Le Giornate*, p. 75). These films are still Vertov films, however, as he participated in this new round of editing. While it might never be known how much he changed these two films, what remains are two films still shaped by Vertov's – forced – hands, films that should still provide insight to his creative techniques. (I should also confess that because my study involves examining copies of these films in varying formats – film, DVD, and video – I have limited my analysis to exclude information on shot duration and overall running time.) As for each film overall, if we include intertitles, but not opening credits, the sound version consists of 718 shots, while the silent version consists of 710 shots. Though there are, at times, significant differences between the two films, both follow the same general structure. After a brief introductory segment, the two films each

contain three major sections, called 'songs': "The First Song: My Face Was in a Dark Prison" (shots 23-164 in the sound version, shots 33-171 in the silent version), "The Second Song: We Loved Him" (shots 165-469 in the sound version, shots 172-438 in the silent version), and "The Third Song: (shots 470-718 in the sound version, shots 439-710 in the silent version).

With the exception of the brief introductory sections of each film, it appears that Vertov is faithful to each section across both films. The footage used in one section of one film never appears in a different section in the other version. Within each section, however, Vertov demonstrates a considerable amount of reworking. He varies shot order within a sequence and tends to use extended, partial, or different takes altogether. He often simply inserts completely new footage. Consider the chart below. I have listed the first one hundred shots of each version of the film. Under the list of shots for the sound version, I have listed where each shot appears in the silent version. Under the list of shots for the silent version, I have traced back each shot to its 'source' shot in the sound version. Often I have found shots that were unpaired – either shots in the sound version that are not used in the silent version or shots in the silent version that are completely different from what appears in the sound version. These I have labelled as 'unmatched' shots or intertitles. What I hope this chart – an admittedly barebones sampling – demonstrates is the considerable re-thinking Vertov undertook in constructing the silent version of *Three Songs of Lenin*.

#### 1934 Sound Version

Shot 1. shot 24 (intertitle)  
 Shot 2. shot 25 (intertitle)  
 Shot 3. shot 26 (intertitle)  
 Shot 4. shot 27 (intertitle)  
 Shot 5. shot 28 (intertitle)  
 Shot 6. shot 29 (intertitle)  
 Shot 7. shot 31(intertitle)  
 Shot 8. *unmatched shot*  
 Shot 9. shot 159  
 Shot 10. shot 160  
 Shot 11. shot 161  
 Shot 12. shot 162 (intertitle)  
 Shot 13. shot 163  
 Shot 14. shot 157  
 Shot 15. shot 165 (intertitle)  
 Shot 16. *unmatched shot*  
 Shot 17. shot 167  
 Shot 18. shot 168  
 Shot 19. shot 164  
 Shot 20. shot 171  
 Shot 21. *unmatched shot*  
 Shot 22. *unmatched shot*  
 Shot 23. shot 33 (intertitle)  
 Shot 24. shot 34  
 Shot 25. shot 35  
 Shot 26. shot 36  
 Shot 27. shot 37  
 Shot 28. shot 38  
 Shot 29. shot 39 (intertitle)  
 Shot 30. shot 43 (intertitle)  
 Shot 31. extension of shots 44 & 53  
 Shot 32. shot 47  
 Shot 33. shot 45 (intertitle)  
 Shot 34. shot 46  
 Shot 35. shot 49

#### 1935 Silent Version

Shot 1. *unmatched intertitle*  
 Shot 2. *unmatched shot*  
 Shot 3. *unmatched shot*  
 Shot 4. *unmatched intertitle*  
 Shot 5. *unmatched shot*  
 Shot 6. *unmatched intertitle*  
 Shot 7. *unmatched shot*  
 Shot 8. *unmatched intertitle*  
 Shot 9. *unmatched shot*  
 Shot 10. *unmatched shot*  
 Shot 11. *unmatched shot*  
 Shot 12. *unmatched shot*  
 Shot 13. *unmatched shot*  
 Shot 14. *unmatched intertitle*  
 Shot 15. *unmatched shot*  
 Shot 16. *unmatched intertitle*  
 Shot 17. *unmatched shot*  
 Shot 18. *unmatched shot*  
 Shot 19. *unmatched shot*  
 Shot 20. *unmatched shot*  
 Shot 21. *unmatched intertitle*  
 Shot 22. *unmatched shot*  
 Shot 23. *unmatched shot*  
 Shot 24. shot 1 (intertitle)  
 Shot 25. shot 2 (intertitle)  
 Shot 26. shot 3 (intertitle)  
 Shot 27. shot 4 (intertitle)  
 Shot 28. shot 5 (intertitle)  
 Shot 29. shot 6 (intertitle)  
 Shot 30. *unmatched intertitle*  
 Shot 31. shot 7 (intertitle)  
 Shot 32. shot 152  
 Shot 33. shot 23 (intertitle)  
 Shot 34. shot 24  
 Shot 35. shot 25

Shot 36. shot 50  
Shot 37. *unmatched shot*  
Shot 38. shot 51  
Shot 39. shot 52  
Shot 40. *unmatched shot*  
Shot 41. shot 56 (intertitle)  
Shot 42. *unmatched shot*  
Shot 43. shot 60  
Shot 44. *unmatched shot*  
Shot 45. alternate take of shots 64 & 67  
Shot 46. *unmatched shot*  
Shot 47. *unmatched shot*  
Shot 48. *unmatched shot*  
Shot 49. *unmatched shot*  
Shot 50. extension of shot 64  
Shot 51. *unmatched shot*  
Shot 52. shot 57  
Shot 53. *unmatched shot*  
Shot 54. partial repeat of shot 57  
Shot 55. extension of shot 61  
Shot 56. *unmatched shot*  
Shot 57. shot 63  
Shot 58. *unmatched shot*  
Shot 59. *unmatched shot*  
Shot 60. *unmatched shot*  
Shot 61. shot 70  
Shot 62. *unmatched shot*  
Shot 63. part of shot 82  
Shot 64. *unmatched intertitle*  
Shot 65. *unmatched shot*  
Shot 66. *unmatched intertitle*  
Shot 67. *unmatched shot*  
Shot 68. *unmatched shot*  
Shot 69. variation of intertitle, shot 153  
Shot 70. shot 87  
Shot 71. shot 153  
Shot 72. *unmatched shot*  
Shot 73. intertitle, shot 123  
Shot 74. *unmatched shot*  
Shot 75. intertitle, shot 123  
Shot 76. shot 124  
Shot 77. shot 111  
Shot 78. shot 114  
Shot 79. intertitle, shot 120  
Shot 80. shot 121  
Shot 81. shot 125  
Shot 82. shot 126  
Shot 83. shot 127  
Shot 84. shot 128  
Shot 85. shot 96  
Shot 86. *unmatched shot*  
Shot 87. *unmatched shot*  
Shot 88. variation of shot 91  
Shot 89. shot 93

Shot 36. shot 26  
Shot 37. shot 27  
Shot 38. shot 28  
Shot 39. shot 39 (intertitle)  
Shot 40. *unmatched shot*  
Shot 41. *unmatched shot*  
Shot 42. *unmatched shot*  
Shot 43. shot 30 (intertitle)  
Shot 44. part of shot 31  
Shot 45. shot 33 (intertitle)  
Shot 46. shot 34  
Shot 47. shot 32  
Shot 48. *unmatched shot*  
Shot 49. shot 35  
Shot 50. shot 36  
Shot 51. shot 38  
Shot 52. shot 39  
Shot 53. part of shot 31  
Shot 54. alt. take of shot 35  
Shot 55. *unmatched shot*  
Shot 56. shot 41 (intertitle)  
Shot 57. shot 52  
Shot 58. *unmatched shot*  
Shot 59. *unmatched shot*  
Shot 60. shot 43  
Shot 61. part of shot 55  
Shot 62. *unmatched shot*  
Shot 63. shot 57  
Shot 64. part of shot 50  
Shot 65. *unmatched shot*  
Shot 66. *unmatched shot*  
Shot 67. alt. take of shot 45  
Shot 68. *unmatched intertitle*  
Shot 69. alt. take of shot 45  
Shot 70. shot 61  
Shot 71. *unmatched intertitle*  
Shot 72. *unmatched shot*  
Shot 73. *unmatched shot*  
Shot 74. *unmatched shot*  
Shot 75. *unmatched shot*  
Shot 76. *unmatched shot*  
Shot 77. alt. take of shot 50  
Shot 78. *unmatched intertitle*  
Shot 79. alt. take of shot 50  
Shot 80. *unmatched shot*  
Shot 81. *unmatched shot*  
Shot 82. shot 63  
Shot 83. *unmatched shot*  
Shot 84. *unmatched shot*  
Shot 85. *unmatched shot*  
Shot 86. *unmatched intertitle*  
Shot 87. shot 70  
Shot 88. *unmatched shot*  
Shot 89. *unmatched shot*

Shot 90. *unmatched intertitle*  
Shot 91. variation of shot 95  
Shot 92. *unmatched intertitle*  
Shot 93. shots 97, 135  
Shot 94. *unmatched shot*  
Shot 95. shot 100  
Shot 96. *unmatched shot*  
Shot 97. shot 103  
Shot 98. variation of shot 102  
Shot 99. *unmatched shot*  
Shot 100. shot 102

Shot 90. *unmatched intertitle*  
Shot 91. variation of shot 88  
Shot 92. *unmatched shot*  
Shot 93. shot 89  
Shot 94. *unmatched intertitle*  
Shot 95. variation of shot 91  
Shot 96. shot 85  
Shot 97. shot 93  
Shot 98. *unmatched intertitle*  
Shot 99. *unmatched shot*  
Shot 100. shot 95

Compared alongside, these first 100 shots of each film reveal how Vertov at times would carry over brief sequences of shots and rearrange their order ever so slightly – or insert another shot, either from elsewhere in the original film or altogether new. The frequency with which he uses a variation on a particular shot, often the same subject- matter filmed from a different camera setup, suggests a considerable reserve of footage (though not an unusual shooting ratio for a documentary filmmaker). The following diary entry from 26 May 1934 – written before the silent version of *Three Songs of Lenin* – reveals both Vertov's methodology and his logic behind it:

*Three Songs of Lenin* had to be made 'from scratch.' And with our 'bare hands.' 'From scratch' – there was no foundation of creative film stock (montage material), since I had not previously worked at Mezhrabpomfilm. 'With our bare hands' – there was no well-equipped and specially trained cameraman who could, without re-training, immediately join in our work.

Some comrades regard the footage left from the shooting of *Three Songs* as either outtakes or retakes that should be handed over to a general film archive.

This is a mistake. These are neither outtakes nor retakes.

They are my creative stock for future films.

They are a guarantee of better quality and lower cost in future works.

Poetical work of excellence can be completed on time only if one has a large supply of poetic work.

This is essential under the kino-eye system. (*Kino-Eye*, p. 176)

Part of Vertov's entry above appears defensive: he seems to be justifying any cost overruns incurred by his project. In a fleeting moment of agreement with fellow Soviet documentary filmmaker Esfir Shub, he argues that a storehouse of surplus footage is not only valuable, but necessary. Indeed, his point is reinforced by his practice. Those of us fortunate enough to be familiar with Vertov's work often find ourselves re-experiencing his films through shots and sequences found in his other works. In his journal he complains about the paucity of usable footage available at his new film studio Mezhrabpom, but he seems to have more than compensated for it with imports from his own works (incidentally, *Three Songs of Lenin* would be his only film with this studio). Shot 579 of the silent version, for example, is the iconic shot of the smiling woman in MCU superimposed upon a wheel of threading spools made famous in 1929's *Man with a Movie Camera* (though in *Three Songs of Lenin* the wheel and spools are motionless). Segments from his *Kino-Pravda* newsreels from the early to mid-twenties abound in both versions of the film. The memorial sequence of Lenin lying in state ("Lenin / doesn't move / Lenin / doesn't speak / the masses / move / the masses / are silent") is drawn extensively from the memorial sequence from 1925's *Kino-Pravda 21* (roughly shots 291-364 in the sound version, shots 281-356 in the silent version).

It is also telling that Soviet officials such as Grigori Zinoviev, Lev Kamenev, and Karl Radek – who all appear in featured shots in the earlier source material used in *Kino-Pravda 21* – are absent from both versions of *Three Songs of Lenin*. Zinoviev and Kamenev were placed under arrest in December 1934 for their alleged involvement in the terrorist campaign to assassinate Stalin, while Radek was arrested in January of 1937 as part of the Bukharin-Rykov-Tomsky group. One wonders if Vertov had included any of these officials in his original sound version, or even if Radek made it

into the original silent version. Certainly the Stalinist show trials of the late thirties gave Vertov much to purge from his own work. Moreover, it is rumoured that Stalin was disappointed with *Three Songs of Lenin* because not enough attention was granted to him. In the sound version, he appears only once (shot 310, in the segment on Lenin's funeral). In the silent version, however, Vertov seems to be more ingratiating: Stalin appears in over a dozen shots (shots 149, 166, 300, 340, 446, 477, 479, 501, 503, 572, 676, 678, 681) and is mentioned in three additional intertitles (shots 299, 502, 608). In shot 632 of the sound version, the Chairwoman of the Lenin Collective Farm states (in synchronous sound) that "women are a great force on the collective farm, and it's not possible to hold women back." A brief shot of this woman speaking also appears in the silent version (shot 607), but the intertitle that follows it reads, "*Comrade Stalin said that women are a great force on the collective farm, and it's not possible to hold women back*" [italics mine]. It is possible that this woman did, in fact, make reference to Stalin when she was speaking in front of the camera (the quoted line begins the shot, so it could have been edited out), but I am sceptical. The silent version's new attribution of this line as the reported speech of Stalin – instead of being the words of the woman herself – is conspicuous. Perhaps the most telling insertion of Stalin into the silent version of *Three Songs of Lenin* comes in the sequence displaying a bench upon which Lenin sat at least once. In the sound version, the intertitle of shot 15 reads, "Here is the bench made famous by a photograph." The next shot then shows a photograph of Lenin in MS sitting on that bench. When this pair of shots is repeated in the silent version, the same intertitle (shot 165) is followed by a photograph of Lenin *and Stalin* sitting on the barely recognizable, barely even visible, bench! Other differences between the two versions seem less politically motivated and perhaps arise from Vertov's differing ambitions in terms of generating effect in sound and silent cinema. Interestingly, the catalogue of Soviet officials that accompanies Lenin's memorial sequence as seen in *Kino-Pravda 21* drops the intertitles identifying who's who in the sound version, without replacing their simple denotative function with the soundtrack either. In the silent version, however, the intertitles reappear. In the final section of the sound version of the film, an intertitle of the phrase "If Lenin could only see us now!" serves as a refrain and is repeated five times (shots 627, 642, 653, 667, 670). Surprisingly, though, in the silent version Vertov chooses to create rhythm differently and the infrequency of the intertitle removes its potential choral quality (shot 644). The sound version's synchronous sections are treated in one of either two ways. With the first alternative, these 'talkie' shots, which tend to be rather long takes, are significantly shortened in the silent version and are accompanied by intertitles that abridge much of the spoken content. Shots 594 and 596 in the sound version (of the female cement worker who describes her ordeal of being sucked into cement and being awarded the Order of Lenin for over-fulfilling the plan) become shots 551-552 in the silent version. Shot 617 (of the man with eyeglasses who speaks of the benefits of the Dnieper hydroelectric station) becomes shots 557-558. Shot 629 (of the elderly bearded farmer who encourages everyone to work as hard as he) becomes shots 601-602. Shots 632 and 634 (of the Chairwoman of the Lenin Collective Farm discussed earlier) become shots 607-608. In the sound version, Vertov employs interesting sound bridges in these 'talkie' sections in which the voice carries over onto subsequent shots that fulfill the demands of that voice. Such technique seems to empower these voices with prophecy – as if to speak it (to hear it) is to have seen it achieved. Vertov's other alternative to a 'talkie' section is simply to drop the shot altogether. Three other synchronous shots, shots 60 and 62 (of a man and a woman each playing a tar) and shot 94 (of a man teaching a woman how to aim and fire a rifle), do not appear in the silent version. Shot 288 of the sound version – the recording of Lenin's actual voice – is not a moment of synchronous sound, but it is still presented with considerable flair: with intertitles that spiral upward. This intertitle, "Stand firm! Stand together! Advance boldly to meet the foe! We shall triumph! The landowners and capitalists, defeated in Russia, will be defeated throughout the world," later appears without Lenin's audio accompaniment toward the end of the film (shot 713). The spinning motion of the text alone makes it the most noteworthy intertitle in the silent version also, even without Lenin's voice (shot 279).

But perhaps what is most striking about the two versions of this film is how similar the overall effect is, despite all the differences: a pervasive cumulative effect is maintained. This, I believe, is the result of a consistency in Vertov's filmmaking technique – a consistency that carries across both his

silent and sound films. In his 1934 article "Without Words," Vertov explains his inclusion of sound within a visual formula as leading him to a new method of editing, one he identifies as 'spiral,' defined as follows:

"The contents of *Three Songs* develop in spiral-fashion, now in the sound, now in the image, now in a voice, now in an intertitle, now through facial expression alone – with no music or words – now through movement within the shot, now in the collision of one group shot with another, now smoothly, now by jolts from dark to light, from slow to fast, from the tired to the vigorous, now through noise, now through silent song, a song without words, through thoughts that fly from screen to viewer without the viewer-listener having to translate thought into words". (*Kino-Eye*, p. 118)

Key to this description of a 'spiral' style of editing – underlying this entire description – is the notion of 'correlation.' The principal unifying characteristic of montage filmmakers is the belief that something significant can arise from an effect created comparatively, from the bringing together of more than one element. For Vertov, this is fundamental: it is his theory of the interval. He first began outlining his theory of the interval in his earliest manifestoes. As he wrote in 1922, "*Intervals* (the transitions from one movement to another) are the material, the elements of the art of movement, and by no means the movements themselves. It is they (the intervals) which draw the movement to a kinetic resolution" [Vertov's emphasis] (*Kino-Eye*, p. 8). While *Three Songs of Lenin* comes a dozen years after Vertov first asserted his theory of the interval, it should be pointed out that in 1934, he still is asserting this theory. He has elaborated further and now even provides more specific formula (specifically, as 'correlations'):

"Movement between shots, the visual 'interval,' the visual correlation of shots, is, according to kino-eye, a complex quantity. It consists of the sum of various correlations, of which the chief are –

1. the correlation of planes (close-up, long shot, etc.);
2. the correlation of foreshortenings;
3. the correlation of movements within the frame;
4. the correlation of light and shadow;
5. the correlation of recording speeds". (*Kino-Eye*, p. 90)

The above list hints at the seemingly limitless stylistic elements from which Vertov will construct correlations. However, identifying specific correlations – and the intervals constructed from them – proves difficult. On one hand, I am tempted toward structural analysis, to search for patterns in all the variations from one shot to next. Despite the significant variations in shot order across both films, similar patterns appear to emerge. These patterns I consider large-scale correlations. For example, in the segment of the first song surrounding the intertitles, "I led a blind life / In darkness and ignorance I was a slave without chains," there are repetitions of movement within the frame. On the subject of veiled women, we see several shots containing figure movement to the left, at times with the camera either tracking or panning left to follow (shots 24, 26, 28, 31 in the sound version, shots 34, 36, 38, 44, 48, 53 in the silent version). These movements are all slow, even cumbersome, suggesting the oppression inflicted through such a tradition. However, after the intertitle, "But a ray of truth began to shine – the dawn of Lenin's truth," the heavily veiled women just seen in prior shots are now shown throwing up their veils to reveal their faces, and usually a wide grin as well (shots 52 and 54 in the sound version, shots 57, 59, 65 in the silent version). The quick upward motions of these women's arms and their veils, the bright flashes of their smiles, and the brief duration of the shots themselves all underscore the liberation of throwing-off old customs. Here, the correlation of figure movements visually boosts the thematic concerns of this segment. Vertov's intervals, though, seem to operate on an even smaller, more precise scale. Consider just two shots, shots 83 and 84 of the sound version and shots 127 and 128 of the silent version. In the first shot, we see a combine moving away from us as it heads to the left. A plane flies in straight toward us and then suddenly veers off to the upper left corner of the frame, with the camera quickly tilting up to follow. There is then a cut to a high angle shot of a crowd of people looking up at us and reaching up and grabbing at pamphlets falling down toward them. Within the cut, there is an

assumed process: the plane seen in the first shot has dropped these pamphlets seen in the second. We followed the camera's tilt up only to find ourselves looking at the masses – the previous shot now becomes the impossible, something akin to their point of view. That which they saw was, therefore, what we just saw: the glory of the combine, the grace of this machinery, the beauty of the collective farm. The pamphlets are presumably promoting all of this, but we are already persuaded. The impact felt when viewing this pair of shots is created by the combination of transitions between these two shots. It is the accumulation of these transitions that create this example of an interval: the correlation between in-frame movement (the plane flying forward and then left followed by papers falling down), camera movement (a stationary camera quickly tilting up then remaining stationary once more), and camera angle (a straight-on position tilting to an extreme low angle followed by an extreme high angle). These are only two shots, but within them we experience not only Vertov's theory of the interval firsthand, but also its striking effectiveness. Soviet Film historians differ in their assessment of the film. Jay Leyda asserts it as Vertov's "greatest film," whereas Denise Youngblood labels it "abysmal," "a degradation in [Vertov's] style" (*Kino*, p. 312; *Soviet Cinema in the Silent Era*, pp. 229-230). While both scholars certainly appreciate the first section of the film, there is wide disagreement over the latter two sections, with what Youngblood considers to be "dreary" and "almost fascistic" described by Leyda as "achiev[ing] an emotional impact seldom realized in the film medium" and "a glowing lyricism" (respectively, *Soviet Cinema in the Silent Era*, p. 230; *Kino*, p. 313). Perhaps this discrepancy can be explained by the fact that Leyda had the enviable good fortune to see the version existing before the 1938 reedits. But Aleksandr Deriabin, who also studies the post-1938 reedits, identifies the film as "Vertov's triumph" (*Le Giornate*, p. 75). In any case, in his own day, *Three Songs of Lenin* proved to be one of Vertov's greatest successes, which unfortunately is evidence of the extraordinary difficulty he constantly faced as a filmmaker. *Three Songs of Lenin* was awarded a prize at the Venice Film Festival in 1935 (for the original sound version that played there in 1934), the only Soviet film so honoured (though it must be said that this festival had only started in 1934). Boris Shumyatsky, the head of Soyuzkino, specifically singled the film out for praise, asserting that it should serve as a model for future Soviet documentary films. Such seeming promises, however, never fully materialized for Vertov, and in Jay Leyda's following brief description of the film's place in history, I read something of a lament: "The documentary films to follow *Three Songs of Lenin* showed little of its influence" (*Kino*, p. 313).

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xinou dong

**from shanghai document to shanghai 24 hours:  
the city, the "sov kino expedition," and the montage complex**

attenzione note

In 1927, a Soviet film crew was sent to Shanghai on a "Sovkino expedition". With Vertovian enthusiasm and curiosity, it traveled every corner of this foreign city, capturing with the camera eye a vast range of physicality and physiognomy with their live kinetics and dynamics. The footage was used both in newsreels, and for the film *Shanghai Document*, released in the Soviet Union the next year. What was presented by the finished film, as it turned out, was as much a *Man with a Movie Camera in Shanghai*, so to speak, as *The Shanghai Battleship Potemkin*: the intercut between the privileged imperialists and the underprivileged Chinese, the rich and the poor, the military troops and the armed workers, renders Shanghai a city ripe for revolution. Only this time, the film ended with newsreel of Chiang Kai-shek's coup d'état, launched in Shanghai in April 1927, which marked the failure of the First Chinese Communist Revolution.

A Soviet film about Chinese communist revolution, *Shanghai Document* was well received by the Moscow public when it opened in May 1928. In his book *Kino: a history of Russian and Soviet film*<sup>i</sup>, Jay Leyda hailed it as a "personal triumph" for the director Yakov Bliokh. It was also Leyda, however, who, in his later study of Chinese cinema, *Dianying: An account of films and the film audience in China*<sup>ii</sup>, pointed out an ironic fact about the film's reception elsewhere, that it was "known all over the world except in China until recent years." Without elaboration, Leyda seemed to have enough reason to make the assertion. Record has it that *Shanghai Document* was selected for export and traveled abroad to Europe and America. According to the Giornate catalogue, it was shown in New York City in late 1928 and was reviewed by *New York Times*; in Germany, it even caused an authorship scandal due to the confusion with its slightly shortened German version. According to Thomas Tode, the film "proved to be a hit with the Communist movement in foreign countries."<sup>iii</sup> A remotely related case was also found in Japan, where Fumio Kamei, who was said to have decided on his career as a documentary filmmaker after watching Bliokh's film in Moscow, later made his own documentary *Shanghai*, a portrayal of the city under Japanese occupation in 1937 which, with its recognizable similarities to *Shanghai Document*, is intriguingly ambiguous. Interestingly, my own encounter with the film as a student of Chinese cinema was still part of an oversea experience and made possible only by its international exhibition. Nearly eighty years after the film was shot, *Shanghai Document* was selected as one of the more than 30 Soviet documentary films in the Dziga Vertov program of the 23rd Giornate del Cinema Muto in 2004. Prints of the film, including the copy from Gosfilmofond shown by the festival, are respectively preserved in Russia, the United States, Switzerland, and England, but apparently not in China.

Why, then, was it unknown in China up until what Leyda called "recent years" when he wrote in early 70's. Leyda might have found his evidence in the two-volume *Developing History of Chinese Cinema*<sup>iv</sup> published in Beijing in 1963. It was in this book, by far the most complete official account of Chinese film history, where Bliokh's *Shanghai Document* was apparently first mentioned as one of the early Soviet films shot in China about the Chinese communist revolution. The chief editor and first author of the book, Cheng Jihua, did not mention this film in 1957 when writing an article about early Soviet films in China.<sup>v</sup> In this article, commemorating the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Soviet October Revolution, Cheng gave an account of other Soviet films that was very similar, even in terms of wording, to the one he gave later in the *Developing History*. He related in detail the earlier making of *The Great Flight* and *Civil War in China* by Schneiderov in 1925 and the later shooting of

*China in Battle* and *In China* by Karman in 1938-1941, but overlooked Bliokh's *Shanghai Document* of 1927. It was inserted only later, in chronological order next to Schneiderov.

Putting these links together, we seem to see a clue emerging, suggesting the discovery of *Shanghai Document* by Chinese film historians in late 50's and early 60's, or at least a decision made by that time to write it into history. This is quite unusual considering the enthusiasm and the amount of attention paid to the Soviet films in general by Chinese leftist filmmakers and critics. To be sure, the bilateral relations between China and the Soviet Union had been cooling off since the 1927 coup d'état depicted in the film, and Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist government broke off the diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union in July 1929, about a year after *Shanghai Document* was shown. This may explain the unavailability of the film in China in its first few years. Once diplomatic relations were resumed in December 1932, however, Soviet films began to be shown officially in movie theatres. Alongside this new availability of Soviet films came a surge of interest, on the part of Chinese leftist film critics, in introducing Soviet films and film theories, both old and new. According to *Developing History*, articles on Soviet films started to appear in large numbers in the film supplements of all major Chinese newspapers in 1933; including, for example, the *Everyday Film* of the *Morning News* which published 55 of them within one year. The following decades witnessed the continued interest in Soviet films with many of them adopted into the canon. Given this overall enthusiasm, the absence of *Shanghai Document* from the known canon of the time is one of the mysteries in Chinese film history.

One may wonder if *Shanghai Document's* obscurity in China is due to the intricate political climate on the receiving side - the failure of the first Chinese Communist revolution it depicted has been a sensitive topic to both the Nationalist and the Communist party. One could also argue that it is simply a result of genre production; that *Shanghai Document* was made as a travelogue and was therefore not meant to be viewed by the local audience in the first place. Putting pieces of evidence together and speculating on how and why it so happened, however, is not the purpose of this essay. What concerns me here is not the reason for, but rather the conspicuousness of, its absence from China. The film's absence is conspicuous because, despite an actual void in the historical record, *Shanghai Document* is by no means alien to Chinese filmmaking and viewing experiences and in fact representative of many of their salient features. It would not be too far-fetched to suggest that its absence is historical but certainly not cinematic.

Could we say, then, that there is a *cinematic presence* of *Shanghai Document* in China? What are the elements that could be said to amount to such a presence? How are we to understand the rediscovered film itself in the light of those elements, and vice versa? The questions raised here originated from the one I had in mind while watching the film for the first time this year at the *Giornate*: why does this film strike me as so familiar even though I have never seen it before? In the following pages, I attempt to answer these questions through a close reading of the film against its historical context as well as its Chinese counterparts. I will first examine how *Shanghai Document* represents the city as an expedition film, and then compare it with Chinese leftist films such as *Shanghai 24 Hours*. Without suggesting a model of direct influence, I explore the multiple conditions of possibility under which the films were made and the shared symptoms of what could now be called the "montage complex." Whereas contrasting montage plays off the dramatic note in the documentary portrayal of the city in *Shanghai Document*, it serves as an outlet for the documentary impulse in feature films about city life like *Shanghai 24 Hours*. I argue that it is this interplay of dramatic and documentary forces that gives *Shanghai Document* its cinematic presence in China. Conditioned as much as enabled by its mode of exhibition, *Shanghai Document* nonetheless provides an opening to rethink the genre of city film in particular and to historicize the theory and practice of montage in general.

### ***Shanghai Document* and the "Sovkino Expedition"**

Compared to documentaries of other great cities, like Ruttmann's *Berlin* (1927) or Kaufman's *Moscow* (1926), the latter also screened in *Giornate*, *Shanghai Document* was shot *not* by someone who lived in the city, but rather by a foreign camera team on expedition. By contrast with other expedition films, however, this one is not exclusively about the everyday life of local dwellers, but instead focused on a city marked by the presence of foreigners "on expedition" themselves. This is

due as much to the nature of the city of Shanghai as to the particular Sovkino perspective. I will explain the interplay of these two aspects through a detailed analysis of the film.

In one of the routine practices of the genre, *Shanghai Document* starts with tracking shots – in this case not, as often, from a train but from a foreign ship sailing into Shanghai harbour. The messages conveyed by the opening shots are therefore at least threefold: first, we are presented with the view of an outsider who comes from the ocean rather than from inland China; second, that Shanghai as a city developed from and thrived as a result of its function as a treaty port and gateway to the West; and lastly, the slow motion of the ship, as opposed to the fast moving train, sets up the tune for representing the tempo of life in an ancient country not yet fully industrialized and up to speed. It is thus made clear from the very beginning that the film is about the West's presence in China observed from a third point of view, that of the Sovkino perspective, based on the assumption of the Soviet Union as a model of alternative modernity and forerunner of the international communist movement.

In the following sequences of the harbour, the interaction and contrast between West and East, the privileged and the unprivileged are introduced. We are told that "Shanghai is a world port and major center of employment in China," where "Chinese junks wait for work" and "foreign warships are the masters of the port." In a view of the harbour occupied by western vessels, Chinese coolies are shown toiling on the quay, carrying heavy baskets and towing the boat. Statistics of their daily workload and meager earnings are interspersed between a series of shots of their straining labor from various perspectives. There are many powerful shots, including a high angle shot of a team working together, close-ups of legs and faces, and a ground level shot of a massive load carried over the camera. The film then cuts to a Western officer, shown from a low angle smoking a pipe, and a few scenes of Westerners resting or napping on their yacht. "Not everyone in the port passes time in the same way," reads the caption. To conclude the sequence, it returns to a broad view of the harbour with a pan shot and repeats the caption: "The masters of the port." The ideology informing the Sovkino point of view is spelled out explicitly.

Leaving the port, the camera turns to the life of the city. Here the film acquires a different quality as it carries out its function as travelogue: images are colorful and exotic, full of eye-catching shapes and motions. We are presented first with a rich man's funeral where beggars help for a small fee; here an indigenous class distinction acts as a segue from the economic disparity of the foreigners and coolies in the port. We are told that "the poor are in constant movement from morning to night," while the camera zooms in to record their life. A series of scenes depicting craftsmen are presented in rich detail, captured vividly from novel camera angles: hammering, weaving, thatching, wood-carving, and decorating. More riveting shots are taken from the street, unfolding another list of local everyday practices: children being amused by street performers, cobblers mending shoes, people cooking and eating at food stands, others bargaining at a fish market, a man with a child consulting a fortune-teller, and religious devotees visiting the temple. All along, emphasis has been placed on many of the more – from a Western as well as the Sovkino point of view, "exotic" activities, hand movements, and facial expressions. The camera lingers around them with great interest and curiosity, and the captions consist of succinct, explanatory words and phrases rather than longer ideologically charged lines. With the aesthetically pleasing novelty and exotic images typical of a travelogue documentary, the film translates the life of the poor into a life under a traditional mood of production in a pre-modern and thus quintessential China.

The travelogue, however, is bracketed by the opening scenes of a rich man's funeral and the closing scenes of people beseeching the aid of folk superstition and religion. This is where the film departs from the travelogue genre and the Sovkino point of view intervenes with social commentary. The theme of class distinction and false consciousness then lead to the introduction of two major social groups in the following sections: the Chinese bourgeoisie and the working class as represented by factory workers. The bourgeoisie is presented as privileged Chinese aligned with and relying upon foreign imperial forces, and the working class emerges from a general portrayal of the underprivileged shown in constant contrast with the privileged.

The class distinction is first embodied by the actual boundary of the foreign concession in the city: many shots are taken from behind the barbed wire in the foreground, clearly indicating a hostile line between the imperial presence and the local community. Chinese bourgeoisie are introduced as

"selected Chinese" who are admitted to the foreign concession. With a few shots of troops guarding the concession, we are told that "a foreign police force protects Chinese bankers and industrialists." Rich Chinese are shown gathering in private gardens, playing mahjongg, attending foreign schools, playing on sports fields, and gambling at horse races alongside foreigners. Inserted between the sporting event and horse race are shots of a rickshaw-man running on the street. Running for a living is set against running for exercise on the one hand, and the running horses for people's entertainment on the other. Even within the sequence of the rickshaw-man, there is a contrast between him and cars moving past him on the same street, each at full speed and thus representing yet another "race" of social inequality.

Intriguingly enough, however, the tracking shot of the rickshaw-man in the "car race" is enabled by a camera position from none other than the back of another car, a car ahead of others! The Sovkino perspective here is equipped at once with its own modern speed and a retrospect in motion, the energy and vision of, in Marxist terms, a more advanced historical stage. A similar approach is applied to the sequence after the horse race, where a high angle panorama of the cityscape represents both a vantage point and turning point. In a roof-top cafeteria of a building, Chinese bourgeoisie are shown sitting around and having drinks. A bird's-eye view of the city is shot from the rooftop, which presumably only the very few who had to such a height could claim and identify with. From there, the film abruptly cuts to the popular puppet theatre and opera: the pastime of the masses, the Chinese tradition threatened by Western culture, and a familiar symbol of the perennial social drama of the puppet Chinese bourgeoisie controlled by the foreign imperialists. To look via the Sovkino point of view therefore is to overlook the city without oversight of its social inequities, and to watch the drama while seeing what underlies it.

The subsequent sequences switch the focus back to the general contrast between the privileged foreigners and underprivileged Chinese, with particular emphasis on capitalist exploitation and the working and living condition of the factory workers. We are told that "Foreign offices and banks control half the Shanghai factories and mills." Factory workers, including women and children, are shown doing exhausting, ill-paid work in unhealthy and unsafe conditions. Numbers are given about working hours, salaries, and child labor in Shanghai factories. The workers are "imprisoned" in the factory where their meals are passed in through the fence, and their homes "marginalized" to the shabby cottages and boats on the squalid waterfront.

The accumulation of all this, as the film now turns to show us, inevitably results in the proletarian revolution. We are told that "in recent years there have been strikes more and more frequently," and that as a result of the struggle, "by March 1927 Shanghai was in the hand of the revolutionary proletariat." Scenes of armed workers' patrols, meetings, and local demonstrations are intercut with those of foreign troops, airplanes, and fortifications around the concessions. This struggle between Chinese workers and foreign imperialists is shown to have been brought to an abrupt end by the "betrayal of the Chinese revolution:" "General Chiang Kai-shek." Here we see a series of newsreels, first of Chiang Kai-shek giving a speech, and then of the crackdown on the workers' uprising: regular troops arrive, machine guns are set up, searches begin in the workers' quarter, and worker leaders are executed. Under the intertitle "the imperialists test their strength in the workers' quarters," however, we also see few quick cuts connecting shots of foreign tanks marching in a military parade and those of dead bodies of Chinese workers on the street. Sovkino's take is clear: on the one hand, as recorded, Chiang Kai-shek is to be held responsible for the immediate atrocities; on the other hand, though without the appropriate footage, the imperialist military power has its share in the consequences as implied by the montage effect of causality between tanks and the killing.

Documenting a failed revolution, the film nonetheless ends with a note of hope. We are told that "More fortifications are erected against the working class, against the heroic proletariat of Shanghai, which retains its iron will to achieve victory!" Lacking images of a "victory," the film visualizes the "iron will" with, literally, images of a group of workers hammering at an anvil. Sovkino's last sight of the city, therefore, is a glance forward toward the future revolution promised by the strength and coordination of the working class.

In "*Shanghai Document: Soviet film propaganda and the Shanghai rising of 1927*,"<sup>vi</sup> Nicholas Cull and Arthur Waldron provide a thorough study of the political context of the film. Having supported

the Chinese Nationalist party (also known as KMT) headed by Chiang Kai-shek and its alliance with Chinese Communist party, Moscow was deeply shocked by the *coup d'état* in 1927. The issue of China became part of the power struggle between Stalin and Trotsky, the latter regarding the former's support of the KMT as "an opportunistic alliance with bourgeoisie military adventurers" and thus a failed policy. The struggle ended in December 1927 with Trotsky sentenced to internal exile and Stalin ordering another rising in Canton, China. The film *Shanghai Document*, which was not released for yet a further half year, therefore, had to be a sensitive response by the director Bliokh, who, according to Cull and Waldron, was otherwise a rather quick-reacting filmmaker. Bliokh's rigidly ideological approach to the events in China was necessitated by the political situation within the Soviet elite at this time. Bliokh had hit on the only safe way in which the Shanghai issue could be discussed. Recriminations might be flying in Moscow over who "lost China," but there are no policies or individuals in Bliokh's version of the Chinese Revolution: only clashing social classes: workers, imperialists and militarist. Furthermore, their actions and fates are determined not by their own actions or wills, but by History...Bliokh had turned 1927's political hot potato into an uplifting and positive piece of cinema for 1928.

Looking at the film against the context of Soviet politics, the authors correctly point out the expediency of its ideological interpretation as well as the underlying assumption which claims an "overriding authority of the Soviet" as the "industrial model of revolution." Bliokh, the production manager on *Battleship Potemkin*, thus presents his own work on revolution in progress, a failed rising in China 1927 as in Russia 1905.

Obviously, *Battleship Potemkin* has been a model for not only the cinematic representation of revolution, but also the reception of Soviet film by a larger international audience. According to Cull and Waldron, "the success of *Battleship Potemkin* in Berlin in 1925 revealed the export possibilities of Soviet film...."

Now it was possible for Soviet filmmakers to reach audiences in the world outside their borders, to use their art to promote the global revolutionary struggle, and seek to rally world opinion against European exploitation of China and other colonized countries. China was already a major priority of the Communist International, which ran a vigorous "hands off China" campaign throughout the decade.

With the intended world audience in mind, *Shanghai Document* takes on the mission of the Comintern and focuses on the colonial situation in China. This vision of the international communist movement, together with an appetite for the exotic in Soviet films of the 20's, has made *Shanghai Document* an expedition-film-on-expedition-itself: it is a film made about a foreign country which is meant to be shown in yet other foreign countries. The doubled, but not round-trip, expedition therefore marks the production, exhibition, and reception of the film.

Insightful as it is, however, Cull and Waldron's reading of the film overlooks the context of the Chinese filmmaking and viewing experience. Criticising Bliokh for imposing "an alien analytical framework drawn from Western Marxist concepts rather than Chinese reality," the authors nonetheless fail to show us how "Chinese reality" would have been represented otherwise. Without mentioning the film's actual long absence in China, the authors speculate on its propaganda value and assume that "in China, home audiences could be shown what Soviet propagandists portray as unchecked colonialism and capitalism in action." But how is the city portrayed by Chinese filmmakers for domestic audiences? What is the "reality" of Chinese cinematic representation of reality?

### ***Shanghai 24 Hours* and "Montage Complex"**

After the 1927 *coup d'état* as depicted in *Shanghai Document*, which also led to the breaking off of Sino-Soviet diplomatic relation in 1929, there was essentially a six year vacuum of Soviet films in China. It was not until 1933 and the resumption of Sino-Soviet relations, that Soviet films began coming to China once again. In February, *Road to Life* opened in Shanghai as the first Soviet film officially shown to the public. In June its script was translated and serialized in *Star Monthly*, again, as the first Soviet film script to have been translated into Chinese. The translator Xia Yan, the

leading leftist theorist and one of the most productive filmmakers, wrote at about the same time his own script *Shanghai 24 hours*, which was made into a film in December 1933.

Chinese leftist film emerged in 1932-1933 due as much to the national crisis of the Japanese invasion as to the reintroduction of Soviet films. According to the *Developing History of Chinese Cinema*, Chinese leftist filmmakers began learning new methods and techniques from Soviet films once they became available and subsequently took Soviet films as a source of inspiration. Some claimed that they had discovered an entirely new artistic order in Soviet films, and they studied them in such concrete ways and with such passion that they came to name, in the manner of insider's talk, certain identifiable stylistic approaches "the Soviet shots." Without specifying exactly what it designates, the naming nonetheless attests the degree to which Chinese leftist filmmakers aligned themselves with their Soviet counterparts. In Chinese leftist films of the 30's, there are many features typically found in Soviet films, among which the ideologically informed montage structure is the most salient.

*Shanghai 24 Hours* is an extreme example of such montage. The film tells a story about two sides of life in the city over the course of the full day. It starts at four o'clock in the afternoon, when a child worker in a foreign textile factory is terribly injured by a machine. Zhou, the comprador (agent for the foreign company) dismisses the report and picks up the phone instead, calling his wife to discuss their plans for the evening. At six, Zhou rushes back home to meet his wife, while the child worker's family is overwhelmed by tragedy and the unaffordable medical cost. His brother Chen, a vegetable peddler, goes to consult with his wife who works as a maid in Zhou's house. It is now seven, and Zhou and his wife are each respectively planning how to enjoy the evening. From nine to eleven, Zhou takes a social butterfly to a fancy dinner and then to the movie, all behind his wife's back; while his wife, excusing herself with a fake invitation to a ladies' mahjong gathering, has been gambling at a horse race in the company of her young lover. After twelve, Zhou with the social butterfly and his wife with her lover bump into each other in a dancing hall, to acute mutual embarrassment. Meanwhile, Chen's unemployed neighbor old Zhao decides, out of a desire to help the family pay their medical expenses and in light of his own deprivation, to burgle Zhou's house. Chen leaves for work at midnight, and his sister stays at her injured brother's bedside overnight. Between four and six in the morning, Chen's sister goes to work, just as Zhou's wife is returning from the dance hall. Mrs. Zhou discovers that the house has been burgled and suspects that, because of his visit the night before, Chen may be the culprit. At eight, Chen is apprehended, while at the same time old Zhao is on his way to get the doctor. From ten to eleven, Zhou goes to the factory, where, with the endorsement of the foreign master, he has the foreign labels on their products replaced with deceptive ones reading "Made in China." Back at the Chens' residence, Mrs. Chen, her employment with the Zhou family now terminated, sits alone and helpless with the dying brother. Upon his return, old Zhao learns that Chen was arrested and decides to turn himself in. At two in the afternoon, Chen returns home, only to find his brother already dead. At four in the afternoon, Mrs. Zhou has just arisen from a sound sleep and is planning how to kill time in the next 24 hours.

Running a full double circle of the clock, *Shanghai 24 Hours* fulfills its title by filming a day-in-the-life of the city, drawing its lineage from such films as *Berlin*, *Moscow*, and for that matter, *The Man with Movie Camera*. Unlike these films, however, *Shanghai 24 Hours* doesn't use the morning-till-night 12 hours scale which has in its very pattern a promise to record routine life as a community's shared everyday experience. Rather, it is about social inequality, antagonism, and mutually exclusive experiences. In this sense it resembles *Shanghai Document* and fully plays out its theme of contrast. While the city's landscape retreats to the background, together with the presence of the foreigners, the clash between Chinese bourgeoisie and working class come to the fore. As if to blow up and probe into this particular contrast in *Shanghai Document*, it strictly maintains the juxtaposition as the organizing principle of the entire film while at the same time turning a more general contrast into direct interactions and causality. The two otherwise parallel lines are woven together through both actual encounters and intercuts based on analogies of pattern and presumed simultaneity: the wiping of the child worker's blood vs. the wiping of chicken soup spilt by the manager's wife, the women workers going to work early in the morning vs. the wife coming back home from the dance hall, and the wheel of the car vs. that of the woman workers' cart, etc. Not

only is the juxtaposition applied rigidly, there are also many visual motifs and social messages reminiscent of *Shanghai Document*, such as child and woman labor, dangerous working condition, and Chinese bourgeoisie as representatives of imperialist interest and imitators of decadent European life style.

Despite all the similarities, however, *Shanghai 24 Hours* differs from *Shanghai Document* in a fundamental and significant way: it is after all a feature film. As the camera moves from street to studio, it brings about a major change in the mode of representation. What we see is no longer edited compilation of street footage shot in and outside of the foreign concessions, but almost a *Marriage Circle* mixed with *Crime and Punishment*. Yet given the lack of a Chinese equivalent of a documentary city film, *Shanghai 24 Hours* is the most nearly comparable example in its chronicle recording of life in the city. What, then, does it mean for a feature film to claim a documentary effect? Where is the "city" in the studio? Why didn't Chinese filmmakers chose to make a documentary film of the city? What did they see in the possibility of crossing the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction film?

In order to answer these questions, we will have to first go back to documentary film and its paradoxical desire for story telling. "The demand for the story re-emerges within the womb of the non-story film" as Kracauer observes, "In fact, the body of existing documentaries testifies to a persistent tendency toward dramatization."<sup>vii</sup> The question is, therefore, "how is it possible for the filmmaker to follow this tendency – tell a story, that is – and yet try to capture the flow of life?" *Shanghai Document*, which itself would have been discredited by Kracauer as "uncinematic" for its abstract tendency and emphasis on ideological "mental reality" as opposed to "physical reality," is not immune from this dilemma and nonetheless offers its own answer to this question.

Documentary-propaganda as it is, *Shanghai Document* has its dramatic core and hence its climax. The climax, however, lies not so much in the depiction of the final confrontation and revolution, I would argue, but rather in the culmination of the montage structure where the two parties meet. If a documentary reaches its climax when it captures the momentary human drama in the flow of life, *Shanghai Document* is at its best when it presents a social contrast that is no longer a mere effect of editing, but a captured real encounter.

This sequence takes place after the Chinese bourgeoisie is introduced and before the focus switches entirely to the condition of working class, when a general contrast of the foreign "masters" and the Chinese poor in the city has been laid out. It starts with a regular juxtaposition of "foreign ladies and gentlemen" around a swimming pool and a group of Chinese boys dragging a cart on the street. While the former sip cocktails, the latter drink water from a dipper on the street. The neat contrast pauses here, unexpectedly, when one boy is shown using this water break to peep through a fence. What he is watching presumably inside the fence is none other than the "foreign ladies and gentlemen!" As the boy joins his group on the street, the contrast resumes between the legs dancing to the music and those treading on the street, and between the turning record and the spinning wheel. Bracketed with regular juxtapositions, however, this sequence does not pass as a standard montage pairing. The geographical relation of the two sides is no longer arbitrary, as we have been seeing in images put together and set against each other by the filmmakers. They occupy the same, however separated, space, where the peeping gaze implies a point-of-view shot indicative of a human drama and characteristic of fiction film. What is more, this sequence is followed immediately by a scene in a children's amusement park where European children are riding on a big roundabout. As the camera moves, capturing the joyful faces, it reveals, again unexpectedly, a Chinese man turning the roundabout. We are shown not only the mechanism of exploitation but the very machine that keeps the two sides in their places. With the kids whizzing past in the foreground, the Chinese man in the harness leaning heavily forward, and the parents watching in the background, the scene becomes almost a staged drama in itself, and what the movie camera does is just to capture them within a single frame.

The revelation of the two sides juxtaposed in real life, rather than the mere montage juxtaposition of images, tells the story the film has been seeking to tell: the social contrast depicted in this film is as much cinematically constructed as it is photographically recorded, and thus just as real. If the montage effect is proved by the real-life intrigue, the dramatization of the documentary is but a result of documenting the real drama in the flow of life. This is how the list of juxtaposition is

concluded with hard "fact," and where the film proceeds to focus on the working class as a revolutionary force and deliver a higher "truth" of History. As Kracauer rightly points out, "In the Russia of the time, the revolutionary reality does not seem real unless it could be interpreted as an outgrowth of the Marxist doctrine." In *Shanghai Document*, as well as many other films, Marxist dialectical materialism finds its cinematic realization in the concept of montage and is visualized in the juxtaposition of class images. With the ideologically conceived relationship between reality and the real, the paradoxical desire for both camera reality and dramatization can be translated into a particular montage complex where truth is to be constructed as much as fact is to be recorded. *Shanghai 24 Hours*, we could now say, can thus be seen as an example of such a practice with shared montage method and its claim to higher truth. The city is not so much about the street and landscape as its colonial and exploitive nature, which makes it impossible to create a documentary equivalent with the aspiration for metropolitanism seen in other city films. If a documentary contains visual encounters of its two main "characters," a feature film can meet with it half way by having a generic bourgeoisie story subject to the juxtaposition as well as the gaze of the working class. Such drama of real-life encounter in *Shanghai Document*, upon further inspection, reveals yet another layer of implication that was perhaps not even intended by the filmmakers themselves: it is also a visual encounter that introduces the Chinese viewing subject. The audiences of the film, who have been watching the montage presentation of two sides from the Sovkino perspective up to this point, switch to a different mode of seeing when the on-screen Chinese viewer is introduced. As in the case of feature film, they are now seeing not only through the camera but also vicariously through the presumed point of view of the character. Whereas in the roundabout sequence the exchange of gazes is only implied by the mutual visibility of both sides, the Chinese boy peeping through the fence clearly stands for a moment for not only the rising class and colonial consciousness, but also where a Chinese viewing subject claims his sight. This is therefore the juncture where a Chinese view and the view assigned by the montage coincide, where the emergence of Chinese filmmakers and audiences are implied, and where, as I see it, *Shanghai Document* meets with *Shanghai 24 Hours*.

Capturing Shanghai with their own movie cameras and making films for domestic audiences, Chinese leftist filmmakers nonetheless observed and represented reality through the "lens" of Marxism. Looked at through such a lens, they internalized the sight and saw the same reality upon looking at their city. They adopted the montage method which allowed them to localize the social antagonism and address their revolutionary need. *Shanghai 24 Hours* as an archetypical example, Chinese leftist films of the 30's and 40's made it their common practice to develop parallel lines in contrast, each representing one side of the oppression, some even with different style and rhythm in the cinematic treatment of the different storylines. With the shared city motif, ideological approach, and montage method, these films together became a logical extension of *Shanghai Document* and thus its cinematic presence despite the film's actual historical absence.

From locating the juxtaposition in reality to identifying the real in juxtaposition, both *Shanghai Document* and *Shanghai 24 Hours* can be seen as symptoms of a historically specific montage complex. The general concept of montage, which Eisenstein attributed to Griffith, and along the line, to Dickens, became ideologically informed in the hand of Soviet films and traveled all over the world with them, including, presumably, *Shanghai Document*. The world exhibition of Soviet films starting from *The Battleship Potemkin* made this ideologically charged montage method part of the grammar of world cinema. This might explain why in the long absence of Soviet cinema, Chinese leftist film prepared a smooth reception for it while at the same time displaying an indigenized blend of Hollywood and European film styles. Montage was by no means alien to China both as a possibility in film medium and as the Marxist and even moralistic interpretation of the world, not to mention the aesthetic perception deeply rooted in the parallel structure of traditional Chinese poetry. In this sense, the montage complex in the 20's and 30's is a result of the heightened awareness of dialectics and social antagonism in the emerging revolutionary cinema, as well as the anxiety over imposing on reality an artistic order in the formative stage of world cinema. *Shanghai Document* therefore documented not only the city, the revolution, and the Soviet response to it, but also a historical symptom of cinematic representation.

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daniel pitarch fernández

### ***stride train, stride! or how it feels to be run over***

Suddenly something clicks, everything vanishes and a train appears on the screen. It speeds straight at you – watch out! It seems as though it will plunge into the darkness in which you sit, turning you into a ripped sack full of lacerated flesh and splintered bones, and crushing into dust and into broken fragments this hall and this building, so full of women, wine, music and vice.

*Maxim Gorky, 1896.*

Even if Gorky in his worst nightmares could never have figured something like the Pordenone Silent Film Festival, he described quite well last year's edition. How many trains did we see during the week? Everything started with Keaton's *The General* (1927) and went on through all Vertov's retrospective, but also in Geza von Bolvary's *The Ghost Train* (1927), Anthony Asquith's *Underground* (1928), Arthur Robison's *The Informer* (1929) and in the serialo *Wolves of Kultur* (1919)). Obviously the train didn't stop after the week, and here it is again in the paper of a collegian (who must say that he arrived late, having travelled to Sacile by train, which is a good old fashioned way to see the landscape).

#### **Trains in cinema**

The relationship between trains and cinema is maybe one of the strangest commonplaces in film history. The (myth of the) first public projection seems to weave a ball of yarn between both, that one can unravel through the next century. From Lumière to contemporary filmmakers we have seen countless *arrivé(s) du train(s) à la Gare de la(s) Ciotat(s)*. And somehow this image (with its own angle, etc.) has acquired the status of a major motive in cinema. It has marked, the more cinema ages, the train as a metonym of the birth of cinema (as if it was cinema's "Rosebud"). This relation is in itself rich and expansive; but I want to look for other aspects not based solely in film history but instead in a cultural cross-section, in which this first image is somehow an intuition of cinema's cultural significance. Or in other words, and in the echo of another mouth, considering the train a pregnant figure of cinema itself, in the way that the gothic castle was for Breton the key to an entire epoch.

This kind of cultural reading has two major scholarly works in Wolfgang Schivelbusch's classic study *The Railway Journey*, and in Lynne Kirby's future classic *Parallel Tracks*. Obviously this is not the place to delve into this and other cultural researches, but explicitly or implicitly they conform the frame against the one I want to trace my account of Le Giornate.

Two aspects of Le Giornate make attempting this kind of reading specially interesting. First the focus on silent cinema, which creates a powerful vision of a concrete historical period (although the festival also constructs silent cinema as a genre with its "mutti del XXI secolo"). Second its international nature, which lets the audience experience (silent) cinema as a truly international force and to identify historical aspects that exceed national traditions (which is, I think, one of the important characteristics that give shape to cinema, and was at its turn amplified by cinema itself). Those two facts and the impossibility of a close reading of a concrete film in one screening, made me think that tracing lines across films and programmes is a promising outline for a paper.

## The train and the cinema

What do cinema and trains share? What I think is most important is their status as inventions of the industrial revolution. They are technologies which appeared in the XIXth century and became extremely important and popular. So they were shaped by and themselves shaped the modern world. Trains and cinema are both new forms of experiencing. Therefore I am not tracing a one-way line (like "the influence of the train in silent cinema") but talking about what they share: their histories, as both are elements of this modern world, are contiguous, and their repetitions are what one should look at. This reading leads us to consider technology, art, imagination or whatever you want to add, not as separated compartments but as moving along the same rail. It is not that I want to reduce cinema to technology, but that I want to expand the railway to social imaginary.

I will organise a rapid discussion of this perspective around four words which define new spaces unfolded both by cinema and trains. I will look for examples in the programmes of Le Giornate that will clarify it and, at the same time, show their importance in a transcultural imagination in the beginnings of the last century.

*Proximity.* Train and cinema made the world shrink. Faraway places were easier known, both in reality or in its representation. The Lumières' views recorded of landscapes and scenes all over the world - and within national borders, as we saw in the screening of the oldest preserved film shot on ex-Yugoslavia. In this way, and in the tradition continuing from the dioramas and panoramas of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, city-dwellers could visit the whole globe. Endorsing the feeling of nineteenth century train passengers, that far places were now at their hands.

If we take further this proximity of the faraway, we can consider also the effect of juxtaposition. The ride in less than a day from the city to the coast put together two spaces until then clearly separated (this is the origin of tourism and the growth of the coast as an extension of the metropolis). In the same way the shows of early cinema were impossible voyages through the world, bringing together distant spaces. This idea is still present in Vertov's films, even as a distinct genre called *probegi kinoapparata* (movie-camera runs or races), as Yuri Tsivian says in the Giornate's Catalogue (page 54).

*Dynamism.* The train and the cinema were both dynamic technologies, related to movement and speed (pure motion dissociated from the capacities of the body), which became signs of an entire world that was going faster and faster. A lot of people have noticed the similarities between the train passenger and the cinema spectator. Both sit in their place, watching through a frame a moving space physically unrelated to their own immobility (in a pure visual mode). Some early cinematic attractions - notably Hale's Tours - used cinema to simulate a train ride, placing the audience in a pretended train compartment through whose windows was seen the cinema projection of a landscape. Both passengers and spectators needed to accustom themselves to this unexpected mobile point of view of the world that somehow affected the social threshold of perception. And it is obvious that imposing this uncommonness was one of cinema's greatest effects, if we recall Vertov or Kaufman films - remember the amusement park of *Moskva* (1926) or their countless feelings of speed.

*Simultaneity.* Proximity and dynamism collapse in this, our third word. The development of a transport medium made necessary an officialisation of time, that was unified (an idea that the USSR transport government carried to extremes, using Moscow time throughout the USSR - which is no joke when we are considering a geographical area that represents a sixth part of the world). There was also the need for technologies that worked simultaneously like the telegraph, which was the true nervous system of the railway. Needless to say, this idea figures in Vertov's praise for a *Radio-pravda*, and as Tsivian points out (*Lines of resistance* p. 370) in "modernist artist parlance". But this is a popular idea too; and we can recall both Vertov's simultaneity (through space, time and even between film and spectators, as the mirror game of *Chelovek s kinoapparatom* suggests) and one of the first motives in narrative cinema which is the "race against time" (obviously: Griffith). In another way simultaneity leads to the idea of a precise ballet, where everything is organised and works at the same time.

*Accident* This fourth word should be the reverse of the others, it is not anymore about the promises of new experience but about its fears. When the precision of the system is broken, technology shows

its second face. The great catastrophes are not natural breakdowns but come from the core of technology, that has inside itself a capacity for destruction - clearly expressed in Blum's films *Im Schatten der Maschine* (1928) and *Hände – Eine Studie* (1928/1929). Even cinema as a spectacle had its risks (for example the fire in the Grand Bazar in Paris, and compare in *Kino-Pravda* n°6 (1922) the smoking soviet projectionist, as Tsivian writes (Catalogue p.39) : "Vertov's time was not for the nervous"). Many films of silent cinema used technological destruction as an element of their plot. In Sacile we could see it in *The Ghost Train* where a railway accident (with hundreds of dead) is the origin of the haunted train (an entire train as a haunted space moving through England!), also in *The General* we could see the "most costly shot in the entire silent cinema" (as David Robinson says in the Catalogue, p.14) where a bridge breaks down and an entire train falls into the water below. But let me recall another silent movie outside Sacile screenings; the amazing *Orlacs Hände* (1924). In this German film the origin of the plot is a train accident (a mass spectacle of destruction), that causes the main character, who is a pianist, the loss of his hands. Then we enter a fantasy about transplanted organs and also technological ones (mechanical hands). Both faces of technology are represented: its destruction and its creation; that leads (both) to the new human, half biological half technological.

### **Keaton and Vertov: so where does this train arrive?**

The landscape I have tried to draw is about two agents of modernisation, expecting to see through them some concerns of an epoch. The question about trains and cinema leads to questions about technology and its receptions (promises, anxieties...). A train in a film is an image of modernisation and technology, so the way in which the characters or the film itself interact with it construct an idea of the possibilities of technology. The relation of humans and technology is clearly a vertovian theme. But what I want to show is that it also concerns Keaton. Or, to say it through another tongue, Epstein once wrote that Lilian Gish "court comme l'aiguille des secondes d'un chronomètre". This reading keeps in focus what I said at the beginning about the transcultural value of cinema, displacing both national and artistic borders; we can trace a line from avant-garde to mass-culture and from USA to URSS.

The train as a symbol of modernisation and modernity is apparent in both Keaton and Vertov. In the first it inscribes itself in the western tradition, which has at its beginnings a famous train film: *The Great Train Robbery* (1903). We have seen countless westerns where the train was the promise of a new world moving forward through the Wild West. In *The General* this newness of the train is pointed out in the army's refusal of Keaton. He is more needed as a train engineer than as a soldier, so he can not fit himself in a role of traditional warfare. Unable to explain this situation (and his own abilities as a modern agent of war) he is misunderstood for a coward and rejected by the girl. Because of his newness he can not assume traditional characters, and the film's plot is somehow the solving of this puzzle of tradition and modernisation (how to fulfill his traditional desires without rejecting technology). In Vertov the train is a more complex symbol of the new, as there it is inscribed in Marxist tradition of the "train of history" (as Tsivian and also Annette Michelson in her essays on Vertov pointed out). The train is a metaphor of the advancing and unstoppable communism, through a pattern which is history itself. "Along the rails of Leninism" we can read in *Kino-Pravda* n° 21 (1925). And at the highest point in *Tri pesni o Lenine*: Lenin is dead, we see an entire train advancing to the audience and stopping suddenly. In the exact reversal of the Lumière brothers' gesture giving birth to cinema (the first projections began with a frozen frame which suddenly came to life as the projector was turned) Vertov stops the train, the film and history mourning Lenin.

In the field of direct relation with technology there are more interesting coincidences between Keaton and Vertov. One is their fascination with mechanical rhythms. In *Chelovek s kinoapparatom* there are plenty of shots of Moscow's tramways. Cutting the frame from different places and in different rhythms they give the feeling of a mechanical ballet, precisely co-ordinated. As is often quoted and recalled, Vertov said in one of his manifestos (entitled *We*) that they renounced filming humans because of their uncontrolled movements. Keaton somehow plays with this mechanical ballet, opposing it to human movement. There are plenty of gags based on a regular line (the rail

but also the volunteers of the army) that is broken by Keaton's character. And we can also recall the precise ballet of the cannonball that goes straight ahead and misses its target because of a curve in the railway.

Another element shared is the play with the fear of being run over by the locomotive. This not only appears in this film but also in *The Ghost Train*, *The Informer* (where Gyppo is supposed to be killed by a train in a tunnel) and in one of the suspense endings of *Wolves of Kultur* (the heroes are on a railway bridge over a river, waiting to be killed). The fear of being run over is the fear of a brutal death, "turning you into a ripped sack full of lacerated flesh and splintered bones" wrote Gorky. In Keaton this appears explicitly in a scene where the character is nearly run over, but saves himself because the locomotive only catches him softly with its front. In Vertov it is a constant motive: his "signature-shot" (as Annette Michelson calls it) is one from the point of view of the railway towards the train, that rides over us. This shot appears over and over throughout his films, but we can recall two scenes in particular. The first is in *Kino-Pravda* n° 19 (1924): the last intertitle of the film says "4 metres of movie-camera memory, as it falls under the wheels of the freight train". Vertov plays explicitly with the simulation of death, as a kind of persistence of what has been called "cinema of attractions", or in another words, the fascination of early cinema with the incitement of extreme moments or feelings in the spectator, looking for a shock experience rather than a sustained narrative attention (as in the delicious Cecil Hepworth's film *How It Feels To Be Run Over* (1900), where the cameraman is run over by a car). The second scene is from *Chelovek s kinoapparatom*: the film begins with a sleeping cinema theatre and a sleeping city. Then we see the cameraman beginning his work: his first shot is this signature-shot. But this time the scene is edited to simulate the death of the cameraman, mixing shoots of the train and of his arms and feet... suggesting his fragmentation. This scene is what awakens the city, in a feminine figure that was until then sleeping.

Both Keaton and Vertov survive against the locomotive. How do they overcome this fear of technology? In Vertov it is through cinema: machine to machine, as in the scene of *Shagai, Sovet!* (1926) where the loudspeakers speak to the cars. In Keaton it is through his strange body and psychology; as he is in love with his locomotive he unites with it in a strange coupling. In fact, the classic joke about Soviet social realism - the mutation of the scheme "boy meets girl" into "boy meets girl, and they have a tractor" - is explicit at the end of *The General* with the couple's final kiss in the locomotive. Keaton's character is somehow the narrative and psychological transmutation of Vertov's avantgardist camera(man). Both are cyborgs, as they can couple themselves to machines. If the hero of *Chelovek s kinoapparatom* is the cameraman (and Kaufman was know at his time for his capacities, as the different documentaries screened in Sacile told us), it is because he can shoot the strangest shots from and in anywhere: in the rails, in the wheels of the train (there was such a shot in Kaufman's *Vesnoi* (1929)), or in factory machines. Keaton's character accomplishes some of these characteristics: he sits in the wheels of the locomotive and without noticing it the locomotive starts moving, or in the scene when he is not run over by the train but instead softly caught. His body experiences mechanical movements as the spectators of Vertov's films feel its dynamic camera and the hearts of machines ("the hearts of machines are beating" declares a title in *Shagai, Sovet!*). Using different strategies (narrative comedy or avantgarde effects) both visualise the coupling between technology and humans through the motive of the train.

CHARLES: I'll tell you something, travelling by train and driving a train are two completely different things. Because of the rails. Do you still sometimes travel by train? What do you see? The countryside going by, like in the movies. Myself, I don't go to the movies anymore. But in the locomotive, the countryside doesn't go by. You travel inside. Always: inside, inside, inside. It's like a kind of music. You go in front of yourself, right to the horizon, and then it goes on, right on the place where the rails come together. And they never come together."

- John Berger and Alain Tanner: script of *Jonah who will be 25 in the Year 2000*

"The man who throws a bomb is an artist, because he prefers a great moment to everything. He sees how much more valuable is one burst of blazing light, one peal

of perfect thunder, than the mere common bodies of a few shapless policeman. An artist disregards all governments, abolishes all conventions. The poet delights in disorder only. If it were not so, the most poetical thing in the world would be the Underground Railway.

'So it is' said Mr Syme"

- G. K. Chesterton: *The Man Who was Thursday*

"But this, too, is but a train of shadows"

- Maxim Gorky

michael müller

## from hodgepodge to masterpiece: vertov's *man with a movie camera* between failure and success

The 2004 edition of the Pordenone International Silent Film Festival offered the unique opportunity to see a complete retrospective of Dziga Vertov's silent works. This breathtaking overview ranged from rarely-seen *Kino Pravda* issues to acknowledged masterpieces like *Man with a Movie Camera*. One of the highlights was the screening of *Man with a Movie Camera* at the Teatro Zancanaro: even though most of the spectators probably knew every single frame of the film inside out, they still seemed thrilled by the power of it - as if it had been the first time they saw the film. Of course, a screening at the Giornate del Cinema Muto is not comparable with *any* screening. Part of the success of the evening and the enthusiasm of the audience were due to the fact that the film has been screened in the best conditions possible. But still, there is no doubt about it: *Man with a Movie Camera* is a masterpiece. Some months prior to the festival it had been selected among the three best films ever made (the Austrian Filmmuseum published a list with the 50 greatest films compiled by film professionals from all around the world). The impressive screening of the film in Sacile, vivid discussions about it during the Collegium Sessions and a crowded theatre are proof enough that this is a justified decision.

After the screening of *Man with a Movie Camera* I began to wonder how people had reacted to it 75 years ago on its first US release?

Obviously, the first step in researching such a question is to consult Yuri Tsivian's book *Lines of Resistance - Dziga Vertov and the Twenties*, published in conjunction with the retrospective. The book includes only one review of *Man with a Movie Camera* from its US release in 1929. Eager to find out more about the reception of the film during this period, I decided to continue my research in an archive. Although I couldn't find many more reviews there, the ones I found give an impression of how the general attitude might have been back then. Browsing through the articles, one thing immediately becomes clear: there was no question of *Man with a Movie Camera* being a masterpiece. On the contrary, American film critics seemed to be rather hostile towards the Russian film. The notion of "masterpiece", of course, is a historical one - it changes in the course of time and space. Reading the reviews of *Man with a Movie Camera* only confirms this assumption. "No appeal For American Fans", the title of one of the reviews, seems to sum up the general attitude towards the film. Raymond Ganlys, the author of the review, doesn't think that *Man with a Movie Camera* could give pleasure to an American audience spoiled by Hollywood entertainment, and concludes: "Looking at camera pyrotechnics for a solid hour is more than they're accustomed to and they won't consider it entertainment." (2).

This insistence on the unusual qualities of Vertov's work is a recurring objection to the film in all the reviews. It is obvious that the critics seemed unused to this kind of filmmaking, which strongly suggests that Vertov was ahead of the times. The progressive quality of his work was not recognized at all. On the contrary, the critics tried to give suggestions on how to improve what they considered a failed work. Their well-meant suggestions, of course, are revealing in terms of how a film has to be to please an average audience. An adjective often used to describe *Man with a Movie Camera* is "tedious". The film, indeed, is perceived to be too long. The critic of *Variety* suggests it should be cut in order to make it more interesting. Raymond Ganly recommends including narrative patterns to improve the quality of the film. Further, he criticizes the film for being too unstructured and thus calls it "a hodgepodge".

Without using the expression “hodgepodge”, Morduant Hall, famous film critic of The New York Times, also points out that the film is, according to him, too mixed. He bases his review on a comparison with another well-known (and today also canonical) title: *Berlin - Symphony of a Big City* (1927). A comparison of these two “city symphonies” of course does make sense since the films obviously have a lot in common. But instead of comparing the two films seriously, Hall uses the comparison as a rhetorical device to emphasize the deficiencies of *Man with a Movie Camera*. He clearly prefers the German film because of its poetic quality. In praising a film like *Berlin - Symphony of a Big City* (and especially in pointing out its poetic quality) he nevertheless proves that his objection to Vertov's film doesn't arise from a simple resistance to a more cutting-edge and experimental filmmaking *in general*. It is obviously not the lack of a traditional narrative that inspires the bad review of the film. In this sense Hall's opinion is more interesting than other contemporary reviews because it doesn't stem from a simple black-and-white dualism (entertainment against art). Although Hall doesn't like the film in general, he mentions some positive aspects (whereas other critics content themselves with enumerating the negative ones). He especially points out Vertov's skilful use of technical devices like the stop- and slow-motion. He also calls attention to the self-reflective aspect of the film (an aspect that will occupy numerous film scholars decades later!) by mentioning the sequences where we see Elizabeta Svilova working at her editing table. In this sense Hall's review is more complex than the others.

Variety's critic addresses another interesting topic, the question whether the title *Man with a Movie Camera* or *Living Russia* is the more appropriate (the film was released in the United States as *Living Russia or The Man with a Movie Camera*). He concludes that “If anything the *Living Russia* name is more appropriate.”(1). He explains this opinion with the fact that the film depicts the everyday life of Russia.

It may seem strange to us today to question the title of a film like *Man with a Movie Camera*, but to ask such questions shows that film history is an evolving process and not a fixed entity. The Pordenone Silent Film Festival is a unique place to experience this interaction between past and present. Reading the reviews it becomes clear (and this is true not only for *Man with a Movie Camera*) that the notion of masterpiece is a relative one.

Not relative but plainly authentic is the enthusiasm of the festival-goers in Pordenone: “Vertov has changed my life.” said an established film scholar during one of the Collegium Sessions about Vertov. And this describes more strongly than anything the power of his films.

I would like to thank Ron Magliozzi and Charles Silver (MoMa Film Department, New York) for helping me find the reviews I discussed in this article.

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*giampaolo parmigiani*

#### dialogus

#### de immortalitate imaginum and persecution complex

Odd things may happen to a regular film viewer in Sicily.

I remember I was so happy when I arrived in town.

I was looking forward to the festival during which I was sure I could relax, doing the two things I enjoy most in life: watching films and reading.

My intention was not to miss any of the films scheduled in the programme and I had also packed my suitcase with a fair amount of books to keep me company in the breaks between screenings.

I wasn't expecting that instead the week would turn into a living nightmare in which I would have to deal on the one hand with the greatest bore I'd ever met and on the other with some serious questions, thanks to which I would make some major discoveries about myself.

This is a brief account of those strange days.

### **Day one:**

As a matter of fact as a student with a background in History my main interest in the programme of the Giornate del Cinema Muto 2004 was Dziga Vertov's films. So the very first day I set out to watch a programme of his newsreels and documentaries, as I thought it would give me some good ideas for a paper I was planning to write. I was sure I would see them only as historical reference, a relevant source of information about the first years of the Soviet Union and I was convinced I wouldn't be affected emotionally.

However at the end of the first screening, I realised that Vertov had surprised me and that the strength of his images had forced me to change my historical approach into an emotional one and that I had felt an unexpected connection with those films and with the people portrayed in them. I had been struck by those images, so vividly representing human beings long dead, often captured off-guard while busy in their daily activities. Men or women, kids or elderly people, politicians, officers, peasants, miners, workers, switchboard operators radiated such vitality with their eyes, smiles, gestures, reactions to the medium - it was clear to me that they were not yet very familiar with it - and I became fascinated by all the shots where they looked into the camera.

However I also felt that the impression of life I had experienced was paired by an equally strong and lasting impression of death, with the awareness that those people had probably all passed away, so it felt like watching people who were still alive and at the same time seeing their ghosts rise from their graves, gazing at me and trying to tell me something.

Then I wondered if that might depend on the fact that I knew I was watching documentaries and newsreels, which were supposed to be realistic and so I started to think over what my approach to fiction films was and whether it was different from the one I had towards documentaries.

I was absorbed in my thoughts when I was suddenly struck by the loud voice of a noisy young man.

Strangely enough it felt like our thoughts had a point in common, as I heard him saying:

"In Vertov's newsreels people seem so alive and to be concentrating so hard on what they are doing or so convinced of being alive, eternal or at least so far from thinking about their deaths. Nor does it seem that they realise that in that precise moment they are recording a memory for future generations in a medium powerful enough to be able to make them live again some 80 years later at a silent film festival in front of a wide audience who would see them as people long dead.

Instead when I watch a feature film, silent or with sound, I normally don't feel that way.

If I am into the film, I don't wonder if the people in it are dead, even if I presume that it all happened a long time ago, because I know it's fiction and I take the characters as characters and as art figures generated by the fantasy of someone else, so they haven't got an age, they never die.

"Take the example of the Tramp, played by Charlie Chaplin: as a character he is eternal and we don't wonder about the real man behind him while we laugh at his gags.

"But what happens when the image reminds us of the physical appearance of real people?"

When we see real faces for example in newsreels and we realise that these are not fictional characters, that they belong to people who once were alive and who might now all be dead?

When we see them smiling or passing by or working?

"What happens when we are confronted by this, by real human beings portrayed in images that at the same time bear witness to their existence in this world and that they are no longer part of it?"

"When we stop assuming that all we see in a film is fake because *it is just a movie* and we start looking people in the eye and we think about who they were and what happened to them?"

"What actually happens when death just unexpectedly leaps out at us from one of the products (i.e. cinema) with which we normally tease ourselves to keep believing in the illusion that some kind of immortality is granted to humans, that those lucky few among us might be able to live forever?"

I thought that the young man had a point. Nevertheless I couldn't help feeling annoyed by his presence, his self-important attitude, his loud and declamatory way of speaking and that long series of questions, so I left and decided to take a break from such serious thoughts, sitting at the bar next to the Zancanaro with a coffee and with one of the books I had brought from home: the *Symposium*, by Plato.

I was about to read what Aristodemus says of the feast in Agathon's honour in which Socrates also takes part, when I happened to overhear another conversation between some people sitting behind me.

One of them was the Bore and he was talking with Paolo Caneppele, Cecilia Cenciarelli and Michela Zegna of the Cineteca del Comune di Bologna. That nuisance was talking again about Vertov and I heard him saying:

"Maybe this sense of death can apply to any kind of film, not only to Vertov's documentaries but to documentaries in general as well, to silent cinema - since it is considered a dead art - or to cinema as such, as many scholars have pointed out, stressing the relation between cinema and death. So maybe even preserving films may be considered as a way to somehow deal with death.

"I'd like to hear the opinion of a wide range of viewers, film experts and professionals in different fields who work with films, who are here in Sacile and I'd like to ask them a few questions about those issues. I'd start by asking what they felt when they watched Vertov's films, then I'd move on to a question about whether they think that silents or cinema in general relate more to life or to death and I shall end with a question about how they regard their job."

Then I heard Paolo Caneppele saying:

"Hmm. As for the connection of cinema with death... Have you ever thought about the odd similarity between medicine and film preservation and more precisely between curing terminal patients and taking care of a film in a terminal state?"

"Doctors are supposed to treat those patients with the best therapies available and to give them the most decent conditions, in order to keep them alive as long as possible, but they are also supposed to respect their dignity and to let them go when there's nothing else to do; they can't stop them from dying. Likewise archivists are supposed to provide films, even the damaged ones, with the best conditions to make them last as long as possible, but they also know they can't stand in the way of the fatal decay of the original materials forever when they are too damaged, so somehow they are also supposed to respect the materials and to accept that one day some of them will be lost forever, just like people. Once they are gone, they are gone.

"However there are archivists who want to preserve anything at all costs. Are they respecting the dignity of those materials and of those who created them and to whom they originally belong?"

And then the Bore answered him:

"You've got a point, but maybe that is linked to the fact that humans find it hard to come to terms with death and to accept that their lives are limited, that there are boundaries beyond which they can't trespass. So, just as they don't accept that their life must come to an end, they can't accept the end of the materials they use either. If you think about it, preserving something is a way to give an object a kind of immortality that you'll never be able to achieve."

And Paolo said:

"Maybe. Anyway if I were you, I wouldn't push the association of cinema with illness and death too far, or you might get to the paradox, whereby dealing with films would be nothing more than dealing either with the dead, or the sick, or with ghosts."

And the Bore replied:

"Why not? After all movies are dead because they often show people who no longer exist or things or places that have been changed or destroyed forever. Besides, many films have either disappeared (as far as we know the majority of the silent films produced have been lost) or the materials are in such a wretched, useless state that it's as if they were already dead.

"Or you can consider them sick, because all films get damaged while being used and then they need to be repaired and because anyway all movies go through a process of decay. Most of the films we have are already suffering from that and the ones preserved in film archives still survive just because they are held in ideal humidity and temperature storage conditions, just like a sick patient being kept alive on life-support systems in a hospital.

"Finally you have the ghosts, because a lot of films are missing. We know they were made but nobody knows if copies of them still exist and we have no evidence of them apart from the reviews and remarks of those lucky few who saw them. Moreover just like ghosts, some of them sometimes rise from the ashes of the past or from the cells of some archive, maybe hidden or forgotten or ignored there for years just because the title was misspelt. What would you call that, if not a ghostly apparition? Putting it in those terms, who could deny that dealing with films can sometimes be compared to dealing with ghosts or to waking them?"

Then I heard the voice of Cecilia Cenciarelli of the Cineteca di Bologna joining in the discussion and dropping a hint:

"If you're after ghosts, you should check out this year's programme carefully. You'll find a lot of films related to that subject. In particular you shouldn't miss a film which is indeed about a ghost: *Le fantôme d'Henri Langlois*, or *Henri Langlois. The Phantom of the Cinematheque*."

And soon after her, I heard her colleague Michela Zegna saying:

"I see you are reading Plato, I suggest you to have a close look at the *Allegory of the Cave*, which many scholars consider to be the earliest description of cinema and a foreshadowing representation of it. You can find it in Plato's dialogue, *The Republic*. Anyway good luck with your paper!"

At that point I couldn't help feeling even more annoyed and surprised. First of all my break had been spoiled by all this talk, and secondly I realised that the Bore had not only poached my ideas as if he was able to read my mind, but that he was also reading Plato, just like me. What a annoying coincidence! - I thought.

Then I went back inside the cinema to watch another programme of Vertov's films and to forget about all that. When I came out, I headed to another café because I didn't want to bump into that tiresome person again. There I opened another book, *The Book of Illusions* by Paul Auster, which I was sure would inspire me for my paper because the story was about a comedian of the silent era, who mysteriously vanishes at the height of his career and whom everybody considers dead for 60 years, till the day he comes back from the past, just like a ghost. I was reading the following passages: "Everyone thought he was dead. When my book about his films was published in 1988, Hector Mann had not been heard from in almost 60 years..." "...the last of the twelve two reels comedies he made at the end of the silent era, was released on November 23, 1928..." "...By 1932 or 1933 Hector belonged to an extinct universe..." "...The movies talked now, and the flickering dumb shows of the past were forgotten..." "...They had been dead for just a few years but already they felt prehistoric, like creatures who had roamed the earth when men still lived in caves..." "...That night as I watched Hector and the other comedians go through their paces...it struck me that I was witnessing a dead art, a wholly defunct genre that would never be practised again..."

I was absorbed in reading when I was distracted by an irritating and by then familiar voice once again. I turned and there he was, sitting at a table behind me. This time the Bore was talking with Annette Michelson, Professor of Cinema Studies at the New York University and founding editor of the magazine *October* in 1976, and Margaret Cavallini, an Italian film projectionist who works in Genoa. First I heard Annette saying:

"I can see your point about the sense of death in connection with documentary films, but in my case the first time I had such a strong feeling was not with Vertov, but when I saw Leni Riefenstahl's *Der Triumph des Willens*. When I saw all those young men dressed in uniforms gathered in such large numbers, saluting and supporting Hitler, first I thought that they were probably all dead by now but then I realised that most of them would probably have died a very few years after that event and not some day in their future, that they would be devoured by the war, that the bulk of them would perish after committing horrible deeds or being slaughtered. What was terrible was that I was not only able to suppose what might happen to them but unfortunately I was aware of it. That feeling of awareness was awful.

"As to whether working with cinema has more to do with life or with death and as to the vitality of cinema, I have two different points of view. I belong to the generation of Americans who have fought to establish films as an important source of research, knowledge and thought, so in general cinema means life to me, also because the idea of cinema itself is connected to the concept of bringing something to life. However I feel that this festival, for example, is mainly for antiquarians because it tries to bring to life something that is dead, even certain films about which nobody would have complained if they hadn't been rescued from oblivion and also because somehow it deals with ghosts. What's interesting in Vertov's films instead is that even if almost a century has already passed since their release, they still have something to tell us, something contemporary for us, contrary to many films, silent or with sound, that have so little to say to present-day viewers. Those are the truly dead films, not Vertov's ones. So in my opinion the main argument that comes out in favour of the vitality of a film is that it must have something contemporary for us.

"For instance Vertov is not for antiquarians but for the people who are thinking about the direction of film and in general for contemporary thinking."

At that point I heard Margaret saying:

"Cinema is life to me, a film often stands for the soul of a person, of a director, it is the legacy of a genius or often of many men of genius who worked together, so I believe that moving images are definitively to do with life.

"As for silents I don't agree with those who say that silent cinema is dead, or that it has nothing to give to present-day viewers. It's just like any other form of art. For instance a rupestrian inscription. Even if you can't fully understand it or if the cultural gap is wide, you are not entitled to call it useless, meaningless or dead, because you are not just in front of any object, but in front of the evidence of an act performed by men a long time before, which has reached us, crossing the space-time boundaries and overcoming the cultural and linguistic barriers and which is still able to talk to us. So it's still alive. The same with cinema, in particular with silent cinema: it speaks another language, but it talks above all through its images, which are still so strong as to reach us, strike us and communicate to us.

"I agree that cinema often is to do with the past, or that it shows a world which often doesn't exist anymore and people who are no longer alive, but that doesn't allow us to call that world, those people *dead*, at least as long as you see them alive on screen. Otherwise we deny their very existence.

"What belongs to the past is not necessarily dead. Even the very instant that I have just lived is gone forever, but that doesn't make it less alive or less present in me or not existing, because maybe it has brought me a thought, an idea. It has left a living memory in me, so it's not dead."

After hearing that, I realised I had been drawn in again by those discussions. It was lunchtime and I had had enough of the Bore and his questions about life and death, so I went to a little restaurant to eat and try to do a bit of reading. So I started another book, Andre Bazin's *Qu'est-ce que le cinema?* and I was just reading the passage where he says:

"...un besoin fondamental de la psychologie humaine: la defense contre le temps. La mort n'est que la victoire du temps. Fixer artificiellement les apparences charnelles de l'être c'est l'arracher au fleuve de la durée: l'arrimer à la vie..." and after that I had reached the point where he says:

"...Dans cette perspective, le cinema apparaît comme l'achèvement dans le temps de l'objectivité photographique..." "...Pour la première fois, l'image des choses est aussi celle de leur durée et

*comme la momie du changement ...*”, when I heard once again the hateful voice of my tormentor. I turned round and I saw that this time he was talking with Tom Gunning, Professor of the Humanities in the Department of Art History and Member of the Committee on Cinema and Media Studies at the University of Chicago and Paolo Mereghetti, one of the leading film critics in Italy and author of some of the most popular books on cinema in Italy.

And I heard Tom saying:

“According to me the sense of death that you associated with Dziga Vertov’s films, you can relate it to any film you watch. Godard once said that every film shows death at work.

And I suppose that a lot of people think about death as well while watching documentaries and movies in general or that they are aware of the link between cinema and death.

“Just a few examples. Once I showed the Lumières’ films to some students and one of their first thoughts was that the children portrayed in those films were all dead by now.

“Another case is that of Ken Jacobs, a US experimental film-maker born in 1933, who mainly works with found-footage. To him moving images mean *people long dead*.

“However there are just as many statements that could prove the opposite perception or at least show that this double perception of the question has been present since the first steps of cinema.

For example a reviewer from the early 20th century, when he first saw the Lumières’ films, said ‘*Death is now defeated!*’, while another early and contemporary viewer, the Russian writer Maxim Gorky, coming out of a cinema theatre in Moscow, thought: ‘*These are ghosts!*’.

“In general I believe that death and immortality are strongly linked with the idea of cinema itself, as Bazin brilliantly pointed out in his essay *The Ontology of the Photographic Image*, where he talks about the ‘mummy complex’.

“Finally as for your question as to whether working with films involves dealing more with life or with death, I’d say that we have the category life when we have the category death: they are two faces of the same coin. Temporality has to do with death and life: when you’re alive you go towards death.

“However in terms of describing what the work of people who deal with cinema is about, I think it has to do more with life, because, to quote Bazin again, cinema is also linked to the attempt to overcome death. Actually it does show death at work, but at the same time it brings things to life. So we could also say that every image is dead, but if it brings emotion it is to do with life and in this way it overcomes death even if it doesn’t abolish it.”

I was astonished to hear Mr Gunning referring to the passage in Bazin’s book that I had just been reading, but I took it as just another coincidence, so I kept on listening and I heard Mr Mereghetti saying:

“I agree that there is a sense of death when you watch these people in Vertov’s films.

Death has a strong presence in his films, but I also believe that the main difference between these newsreels and the news nowadays is that in Vertov’s films you can still see reality as a whole, whereas on our televisions or at the cinema we don’t get to see it anymore.

“In our society death is a concept that’s somehow removed and hidden - along with the concepts of pain, of ageing - and we try to forget about it. It’s not like in the fifties, for example, when death and illness were still very present and noticeable in society. In those days old people used to die at home and even children were used to those events. In my childhood days in the fifties I can vividly remember my grandmother being ill at home. Death was a familiar experience and there was no need to bring it out on screen as well. Some French film critics in the fifties even stated it was immoral to show death in films.

“Today instead our society seems to have lost the sense of reality and death and we have come to consider death as something fictional or distant, which doesn’t take place next to us. It just happens on the screen. I believe this is the reason why those images in newsreels and documentaries of the twenties strike us so much, because they don’t conceal it and we are no longer used to looking death in the face and having to deal with it.

“As for your question on what my job is about, I’ll tell you that cinema has always represented to me a way to open my mind, to learn about the world. The more I got into movies, the more I learnt about the world, about politics. Moreover even if it’s my job, cinema is also fun for me, it’s still a

pleasure and it's still a way to know more about the world and about people. I am not the kind of critic who enjoys writing about films just for the sake of talking to himself or of using a cryptic language, obscure for the majority of people. I do this job with the idea of helping people to understand cinema, because cinema helped me in the first instance to live better, to improve the quality of my life, to learn, to understand the world around me better, to broaden my horizons.

"So cinema to me is undoubtedly something that goes towards life, something that can better people's lives and which has definitely to do more with life than with death.

"Thus I don't feel I'm dealing with ghosts, when I watch people in films.

It's like looking at paintings. Do you feel you are looking at a ghost when you look at a portrait of a person in a picture?"

After hearing that last sentence I realised how late it was and that I had been so enthralled by the conversation that I had missed the next film, which I really wanted to watch. Then I got so angry at the Bore who had been disrupting my plans all day, that I thought I'd better get back to the hotel to calm my nerves and stay there the rest of the day. I thought that I would see more movies the next day.

## **Day two**

The day after I woke up in a good mood, convinced that my bad day had been due only to a series of unlucky coincidences, so when I got to Sacile I was confident I would manage to enjoy the films and avoid any nuisance. So it was until noon. After the last screening I went to a café, ordered a cup of tea and went back to reading a book, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, by Vladimir Nabokov, which I had discovered by chance and started a few days before the festival.

After the first few pages I realised that it might have something in common with the possible subject of my paper, because it was about death; more precisely about a dead person, a writer, and the traces he left behind him and about the efforts made by his half brother to reconstruct the mysterious existence of this elusive figure, starting from a few scanty and often misleading clues in the novelist's private papers and going on by contacting people who knew him. Despite the fact that in the course of the book I got the impression that the main character could never get to the *real* Sebastian Knight and that his search, however intriguing it was, was bound to fail, what I found interesting was that an apparent detective story about a deceased person was turning into an investigation into the nature of human identity. Besides oddly enough the narrator's search method reminded me a bit about the work of a film archivist...

I was just sipping my tea while I was reading the passage when Sebastian's stepmother says: "*I've always felt... that I never really knew Sebastian, I knew he obtained good marks at school, read an astonishing number of books,...I knew all this and more, but he himself escaped me. And now...I cannot help thinking that he will always remain an enigma...*", when I heard once again the brazen voice of my tormentor. He was sitting at the table right in front of mine, talking with Aleksandr Deriabin, film scholar and researcher and scientific collaborator of the Russian State Documentary Film and Photo Archive and with Rebecca Vick, Mitchell & Kenyon Project Assistant at the British Film Institute.

First I heard Aleksandr saying:

"It's always impressive when someone looks straight into the camera. It is a very exciting moment, a moment of eternity. In those moments I would like to stop the film, freeze the frame and watch that specific face for hours, as I have the sensation that the person who's looking at the camera is just staring at me and wants to say something which may be important for me.

"You said it was shocking for you to watch Vertov's films and realise that people apparently so alive were actually dead and you wondered if other people have ever had this double feeling. Well, for example Marina Tsvetayeva, a Russian poet born in 1892, once described herself while looking at the crowd and thinking: '*Oh my God! They are all going to die one day!*'. So she associated even a living crowd with death.

"In general a connection between cinema or photography and death has often been recognised.

Anna Akhmatova, another Russian poet, who was born in 1888, said that when somebody dies, his image changes. And if I may remind you, both Truffaut and Pasolini said that when you film a person, you're filming the process of a death.

"Filming is recording one moment in time that will never recur, which has gone forever.

In spite of that, I don't feel that my job has to do more with death than with life, because when you work with films, as I do as a researcher, every day you make new discoveries. Images ask you something, it's up to you to understand what. So it's a mysterious job somehow."

After that, I heard Becky saying:

"I agree with what Mr Deriabin said. During my experience on the Mitchell and Kenyon Project, I've come to consider the job of an archivist very similar to both that of a historian and of a detective and I don't see death in those films, I see the life in them. Thanks to them I had the chance to see the harshness of the life of those people, their conditions, but I was also struck by their humanity. So I definitely don't feel I'm working with dead people or dead materials.

"I don't research silent films because they show dead people but because, despite the fact that the people portrayed in those images are dead, they still have so much to tell us. They communicate so much. This kind of images makes you think a lot.

"The way I see my job is that by preserving films and making the best images you can get out of these materials available, you can bring something to life, to its former life and by researching them you bring appreciation for what that something was and what it means. So it's not dealing with death, but rather celebrating something, stressing its importance and significance, by honouring the life in it.

"Moreover dealing with silents is interesting because it brings to life something that is considered a dead art and for me this festival is an appreciation of that art that celebrates the life in silent films."

After realising I had again been enchanted by those conversations, I admitted that meeting that tiresome person wherever I went couldn't possibly be just a mere coincidence; yet I couldn't reconcile myself to the idea of being tormented by him till the end of the festival and I set out to stick to my films-and-books-programme, so I suddenly stood up and rushed into the cinema just in time for the next showing.

When I went out I was glad not to see the Bore around for once and in order to avoid him this time I chose a secluded spot for my readings, a little bench by the Livenza river. I got there and then I picked a book from my bag, which I was sure would help me wind down, *Zazie dans le métro*, by Raymond Queneau.

I was reading the dialogue between Zazie and her uncle Gabriel, where she jeers at the adults' habit of using a complex and elaborate language just to say nothing or to talk nonsense:

"...*On roule un peu, puis Gabriel montre le paysage d'un geste magnifique.*

- *Ah! Paris, qu'il profère d'un ton encourageant, quelle belle ville. Regarde-moi ça si c'est beau.*

- *Je m'en fous, dit Zazie, moi ce que j'aurais voulu c'est aller dans le métro.*

- *Le métro! beugle Gabriel, le métro!! mais le voilà!!!*

*Et, du doigt, il désigne quelque chose en l'air.*

*Zazie fronce le sourcil. Essméfie.*

- *Le métro? qu'elle répète. Le métro, ajoute-t-elle avec mépris, le métro, c'est sous terre, le métro.*

*Non mais.*

- *Çui-là, dit Gabriel, c'est l'aérien.*

- *Alors, c'est pas le métro.*

- *Je vais t'expliquer, dit Gabriel. Quelquefois, il sort de terre et ensuite il y reentre.*

- *Des histoires. ..."*

And after that I read the passage where Gabriel tells his niece:

"...- *Zazie, déclare Gabriel en prenant un air majestueux trouvé sans peine dans son répertoire, si ça te plaît de voir vraiment les Invalides et le tombeau véritable du vrai Napoléon, je t'y conduirai.*

- *Napoléon mon cul, réplique Zazie. Il m'intéresse pas du tout, cet enflé, avec son chapeau à la con.*

- *Qu'est-ce qui t'intéresse alors?*

*Zazie répond pas.*

- *Oui, dit Charles avec une gentillesse inattendue, qu'est-ce qui t'intéresse?*

- *Le métro.*

*Gabriel dit: ah. Charles ne dit rien. Puis Gabriel reprend son discours et dit de nouveau: ah. ..."*

I was just reading that when I heard the voice of my enemy again, coming from the bridge over my head. He had evidently met David Robinson, the director of the festival, crossing the bridge and I heard David saying: "Please above all try to avoid Acaspeak in writing your paper!"

And the Bore answered: "What do you mean by that?"

David replied: "I mean that you should write in English, liberated from the constraints of a language that often degenerates into loose and lazy jargon. Do you need an example?"

I see you are reading *Zazie dans le métro*. To quote her, think of what she would say if she heard somebody talking using words like analepses, centrality, citationality, diegetic, heterogeneity, intertextuality, narrativity, narratology, neoformalism performativity, phenomenological, scopophilia, symptomology and synecdoche. She would probably repeat all those terms by adding in the end the two words she employs when she's asked if she'd like to see Napoleon's grave...!

Have I made myself clear?"

And I heard the Bore whispering: "I guess so."

And then David carried on: "Cheer up! I just mean that we don't want you to write something which is academically correct but which lacks passion. I'm only encouraging you to be bold, daring and to come up with your own personal point of view on films. For example I like the subject you proposed for your paper. It's all about the connection of cinema with the ideas of immortality and eternity, isn't it?"

And the Bore said: "Well, actually I hadn't thought about that in those terms yet, but I think you've just suggested me the right title for my paper. Thank you."

And David: "Don't mention it! Anyway I want to give you a last tip. Don't miss the Mitchell and Kenyon programme; I'm sure it'll give you some ideas for your paper. And above all don't miss the masterclasses in accompaniment of the School of Music and Image held by Neil Brand! We have stressed so much on the importance of music during this festival and you can learn a lot there!"

When I heard that I couldn't believe my ears. Another impressive coincidence! The Bore was reading *Zazie dans le métro* like me, as David had just mentioned. I started to feel a bit dizzy. How was that possible? Was I going crazy or what? I dropped that book immediately and chose another one, and I was pretty sure that I was the only to have it, because it was a rare volume about a very specific period, the First World War: *Écrits de guerre, 1914-1918*, by the French Historian Marc Bloch. I was reading the beginning of the first section, called *Souvenirs de guerre 1914-1915*, where he says:

*"J'ai eu l'honneur de prendre part au cinq premiers mois de la campagne de 1914-1915. Je suis maintenant à Paris, en congé de convalescence, me remettant peu à peu d'une grave fièvre typhoïde qui, le 5 janvier dernier, me força à quitter le front. J'ai des loisirs. Je les emploierai à fixer mes souvenirs avant que le temps n'efface leurs couleurs, aujourd'hui si fraîches et si vives. Je ne recueillerai pas tout. Il faut faire à l'oubli sa part. Mais je ne veux pas abandonner aux caprices de ma mémoire les cinq mois étonnants que je viens de vivre. Elle a coutume de faire dans mon passé un triage qui me paraît souvent peu judicieux. Elle s'encombre de détails sans intérêt et laisse s'évanouir des images dont les moindres traits m'eussent été chers. Le choix dont elle s'acquitte si mal, je veux qu'il soit cette fois remis à ma raison. ..."*

I was so engrossed in that book that I didn't realise that my nemesis was sitting on a bench next to mine with two more victims, asking them his usual questions. The first person I recognised as Elaine Burrows, former Special Projects Manager of the National Film and Television Archive at the British Film Institute, outstanding film archivist and awarded the Jean Mitry Prize during the Giornate 2003. The other was Pin Pin Tan, a producer and documentary film director from Singapore. First I heard Elaine saying:

"Cinema and immortality...Hmm!"

"As a film archivist I dealt especially with documentaries, so my approach is a bit different."

I think that it's hard for all of us to accept that we must die, we want things to stay alive, but I don't see film-making as a way to provide a form of immortality to things. I do believe instead that filming is a way to fix things in a precise moment of time.

"One of the many possibilities of cinema is that it can document. For example we can see what a place really looked like or what people, habits were like and how much they have changed. And it can make us live extraordinary experiences.

"An example: one of my favourite films is one of a series of about a dozen short comedies, made in 1927, and known as both *Riviera Revels* and *Travellaughs*, featuring Michael Powell as an actor. The film includes an incredibly brief high-angle shot of a bullring, somewhere in the south of France, a bit of footage which was evidently lifted from a documentary film of the period and incorporated into the story. It showed bull leapers and bull leaping, such as we are told performed in ancient Crete, around the 16<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C. It was an extraordinary moment for me. The fact that these few frames were able to connect me directly with the Minoan civilisation of more than two thousand years ago has made a lasting impression. Though I saw it only on that one occasion, about twenty years ago, I still remember it.

"In this case watching this movie was an unexpected chance for both a discovery and a journey through time, but this is just an example because cinema has so many different facets.

"So if films have such potentialities, it means that they have to do not only with death, but also with life, with history, with our past, with memory, with the traces that humans leave behind them, even the ones which aren't necessarily left in order to be remembered or to attain to some kind of immortality, as in the case of the often unintentional protagonists of Vertov's documentaries.

"Hence if you ask me if my work, that is to say preserving films, has to do more with life or death, I would answer you: Both! It's all in there: if you don't preserve a film, it dies and we would lose something about our past, something which is irretrievable.

"Or maybe the best answer would be by quoting the title of Powell and Pressburger's film: *It's all A matter of life and death!*

"We know so little about silent cinema because we don't really know how much we've lost of it and we can't know exactly what it really was like, because we've lost too much.

So the more you lose, the less you can be certain of anything that regards our past.

"Who knows? Maybe if we had more, we should have to revise our past and rewrite our history or the history of cinema the way it's traditionally told as storytelling and to face that all we've learnt or discovered so far is wrong."

After her I heard Pin Pin saying:

"I agree with what Elaine said, but my perspective as a documentary director is a bit different.

I also believe that cinema can help to document reality and I'm interested in the changes occurring to people and places in the course of the time, but I would say that what I do in my job is trying to *hold time still* and I believe that filming documentaries is a way to do that.

"That also affects the way I look at documentaries. In fact I think I approach sound and silent films in the same way: I pay attention to the contents and to what the films choose to represent and I try to look at films in their own terms, but when I watch documentaries I also try to figure out in which way the film-maker is trying to hold time still. For example while I watch Vertov's films I can't help taking notice of how he's documenting and I recognised in him a trait which belongs to me as well, which I could call the compulsion to record and to document."

And the Bore said: "What do you mean by that?"

And Pin Pin answered: "I'll give you an example by telling you about my job.

Apart from realizing documentaries for television, there is an experimental side of my activity, which basically consists in walking around the city with a little digital camera and a recorder, trying to catch images of people and to record the music of the city: sounds, noises, voices (even the one of the woman reading the announcements of the trains of the **underground**).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Her latest work, a video called *SINGAPORE GAGA* has just been premiered at the last Singapore International Film Festival and the brief description that accompanied it, said: «To be seen, to be heard

"It all started in 1996 when I saw what I believe to be the most ancient footage I've ever seen on East Asia, which had been lifted from some silent Dutch films. It was about the former Dutch colonies and it was shocking to realise how much my country had changed. It looked so familiar and so different at the same time and then I realized how important it was to document, to leave a trace of what a place is like.

"So to answer your question I don't feel that what I try to do in my job - to hold time still - is connected with the desire of immortality. Maybe it has to do more with the fact of not wanting things to change or of wanting at least to record those changes, in order to give people a point of reference to compare things with or at least the chance to realize how things have changed. Anyway I definitely feel that my work has more to do with life than with death."

When she ended and they left I realised it was getting dark and that I had missed some more films. I had been fooled again by the Bore. He had again managed to spoil my day and my mood, so I caught the first bus to get back to the hotel in Pordenone. I had had enough of him for that day and I didn't want to take any chance of meeting him again.

### **Day three:**

The next day when I was back in Sacile I read on the daily schedule that one of the masterclasses that David Robinson had mentioned was going to take place inside Palazzo Carli at 10.30 a.m., and remembering how much he had praised it, I thought of attending one.

He was right. It was excellent and Neil Brand proved to be such a great teacher that I decided to write some notes about it after the class. Only Neil Brand and another musician, Philip Carli, were left in the room, so I remained seated peacefully, happy at having managed to avoid the pain in the neck for once. Then I went to the tiny café in front of the Ruffo for a cup of tea and I felt like reading a bit of poetry, seeking some inspiration for my paper. So I opened the *Spoon River Anthology*, by Edgar Lee Master and I chose the epitaph about Minerva Jones which goes like this:

*"I am Minerva, the village poetess,  
Hooted at, jeered at by the Yahoos of the street  
For my heavy body, cock-eye, and rolling walk,  
And all the more when "Butch" Weldy  
Captured me after a brutal hunt.  
He left me to my fate with Doctor Meyers;  
And I sank into death, growing numb from the  
feet up,  
Like one stepping deeper and deeper into a stream  
of ice.  
Will some one go to the village newspaper,  
And gather into a book the verses I wrote? -  
I thirsted so for love!  
I hungered so for life!"*

I was so moved by this voice from the past, that I didn't realise that Neil Brand and Philip Carli were now sitting at the table in front of mine, talking with someone I couldn't see - he was behind a column - but whose voice was unfortunately very familiar to me and not at all music to my ears. The Bore! First I heard Mr Brand saying:

"I have a different approach to films because I'm a musician and when I watch a movie I don't see it only as a member of the audience, but also as a person who works with them. I have an internal point of view and an emotional approach and that always occurs to me both with silents and sounds, unless what I'm watching sounds all false, clearly unreal, or it doesn't ring any bell in me."

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and to belong to Singapore. Featuring the RJC Harmonica Ensemble, MRT train announcements, Victor Khoo and Charlee, Margaret Leng Tan, sounds from the void deck, the cheer leading troupe from Madrasah Aljunied and more.»

And the Bore asked: "What do you mean by internal point of view?"

And Mr Brand answered: "I mean that whatever the accompaniment or the soundtrack, I always immerse myself in the film and I can hear the music in my mind. For example when I watch Vertov, I can hear the noise of the machines, of the trains, the voices of the people. This also happens because I have an emotional approach with the images and I've always had it since I've started to watch feature films.

"Besides I was also trained as an actor and this was very helpful for my job because when I watch a film I remake the story in my mind just like an actor would do.

"So I deal with films first as a person and then as a musician, that's to say that I try to bring my personal experience and background and to have an organic approach.

"As a matter of fact I believe that the more open and emotionally charged you are, the more your music and approach to films can improve.

"I can give you an example. In my case a few years ago I faced a bad period, so I went in analysis for a while and I must admit that I benefited a lot from that experience. It made me more open towards myself and my emotions, helped me to let out my feelings and to get to know myself better. After that my music has improved too, both in terms of quality and of capability of attuning to the film and of being on the same wave-length as the characters.

"However I think this is not something you can just learn, I regard also as a gift the ability of tuning in on a film and of communicating what you are feeling by means of music. And it is so important, because music has to do with the direction of emotions and musicians try to make the audience feel all the same: they influence the audience how to see.

"In fact I believe that silents are not films with the sound taken off, but that they are a full theatrical cinematic experience and the theatricality is what you get when you see it."

And then I heard Mr Carli saying:

"I agree with what Neil said. I see myself as someone who contributes to the film, a partner of it. I know that when I play for a silent I generally accompany people who died long time ago, but in that precise moment they are no longer dead, they are alive on screen and I feel as if I was working with them.

"As a musician you must try to be part of what the film is trying to suggest, hinting at and to be part of it. I believe that the music can bring something to the film and to the perception of it."

After Mr Carli finished, they all left because I heard they wanted to see the film about Henri Langlois. First I felt relieved and went back to my book, but then I recalled that Cecilia Cenciarelli had recommended not missing that movie. I was torn because she had made me curious about it, but I didn't want to risk meeting that Bore again inside the cinema. Eventually I got into the Ruffo and once I realised he was not around, I calmed down and I even managed to read a bit more of Auster's *The Book of Illusions* before the beginning of the showing. I remember I read this passage: "...If someone makes a movie and no one sees it, does the movie exist or not? That's how he justified what he did..." "...They had made a pact in 1939 to produce films that would never be shown to the public, and they had both embraced the idea that the work they did together should ultimately be destroyed. Those were the conditions of Hector's return to film-making..." "...he didn't make films in order to destroy them - but in spite of it..." "...He would already be dead by the time his films went into the fire, and it would no longer make any difference to him..."

I paused at that point to meditate on those words. I realised that I had never considered the idea of film-making and of creating art separated from the desire of showing it or from the hope of achieving some kind of eternity. Definitely that was a case where the purpose of making movies was not to reach immortality through posterity.

Then the lights went out and *Le fantôme d'Henri Langlois* started.

After the film I went outside and of course my sworn enemy was already there. It almost seemed that he had been waiting for me and that he was doing that on purpose, just to wind me up. He was standing in the middle of the little square in front of the Ruffo, talking to Francesca Angelucci of the

Cineteca Nazionale-Scuola Nazionale di Cinema in Rome and William Martin from the University of Chicago, one of the mentors of the current edition of the Collegium Sacilense.

Though I was tired of hearing the Bore chattering, I couldn't help stopping and listening to the conversation, as I heard they were discussing the film I had just seen.

First I heard the Bore stating overconfidently:

"I think this movie may represent a good reply to those who don't understand the importance of preserving film, who consider it useless and who regard silent cinema as a dead art. Langlois obviously didn't think so, as it's shown by the choices he made in his life. On the other hand one can't possibly deny that this film gives also evidence to my theory that dealing with films is like dealing with ghosts or with death. Here even the main character is a ghost, someone who's dead, as the title highlights".

And then Francesca said: "I disagree with you. Watching this film, you don't get the feeling that Langlois is a ghost. On the contrary he seems to be still alive, still living among us, because his persona comes across as very alive in this movie and because his actions, his words did not just mark out his age, but they influence the present of all of us.

"Moreover have you heard what he said in the film? '*...We must run and hurry up, this is a race against death, against the death of films...*' I believe that it shows that according to him a film is dead only when it really dies, i.e. when it disappears, when it has not being rescued or preserved. So it is clear that dealing with films didn't mean dealing with ghosts or dead materials for him and that in general, movies were alive for him, not dead, at least as long as you could touch and watch them."

After that Bill added: "Furthermore he rescued films not for his own good but for the benefit of the whole world and of future generations. And by doing that he created the Cinémathèque française which is definitely not a ghost. So if Langlois is a ghost he must be a living one, whose presence still haunts not only the Cinémathèque, but also the lives of all the people who work in this field, by being an inspiration to everyone. In fact he set an example of a life totally devoted to a passion, the one for films and all spent to pursue a mission, preserving them, even at the cost of great sacrifices. Therefore if he is a ghost, I hope he'll keep on haunting us for a long time."

And the Bore replied conceitedly: "All right but not all the institutions Langlois created are still as alive as the Cinémathèque. For example Le Musée du Cinema, which was founded by him in 1972 and which used to be the biggest museum in the world devoted to cinema, that is closed now and, as the film tells, we don't yet know when it's going to reopen.

"What is that then if it isn't another ghost? A ghostly institution this time."

At that point I realised I couldn't stand that presumptuous person and his puffed-up attitude any more and so I decided to cut in on the conversation and have my say. Actually I couldn't keep myself from commenting on his last statement and so I told him: "If I bought your point of view, then I should assume that all films are ghosts or about ghosts. But what do you think about Vertov's films, then? In these last few days you've kept on asking all people around me about their opinions on Vertov, but you never said yours."

And he said: "Well, actually I said that when I spoke to Paolo Caneppele, you didn't listen carefully enough. Anyway if you want, I'm ready to reassert now that I think that Vertov's documentaries and newsreels communicate a deep feeling of life, but that they also convey a strong sense of death and so I believe that they are definitely to do with ghosts. Besides I would like to add that I regard even the two documentaries about Dziga Vertov screened here at the festival as ghost-related pictures (*Dziga Vertov and his brothers, All the Vertovs*). In fact in both films the directors have striven to track down the traces of Vertov and of his two brothers in the past, thus evoking people who are now dead but whose haunting presence has nevertheless been felt everywhere during the festival, just like ghosts.

"But now it's your turn. What are your feelings about Vertov?"

I wasn't expecting him to ask me that question too, but I didn't balk at it and I made it brief saying: "I normally associate his films with life especially if we take into account that Vertov stated many times that his aim was to show life as it really was and the real lives of the people...Actually I

think we know how he would answer your question on whether there is a connection between working with films and death...In a note I read in the exhibition in Palazzo Flangini-Biglia, *Vertov at work*, he wrote: "...the camera (the film-maker's telescope)...reverts time, to trace the origins of things and events..."...Or I could mention the scene from *Kino-Glaz*, as recalled by both Aleksandr Deriabin and Pin Pin Tan, where Vertov displays a reanimation, reverting time and filming the process of the killing of a bull backwards...In my view these examples witness that not only Vertov considered filming as an activity concerning life more than death, but that he also believed in the ability of cinema to bring people and things back to life...in the power of the images to oppose death or to be at least a remedy for it..."

But then I paused and thought: Gosh! I've been had! He's managing to interview me as well on Vertov and I'm beginning to talk just like him. Oh, I hate him! But he won't succeed because I won't go on. So I found an excuse to leave, I said goodbye to Francesca and Bill and rushed back in the cinema Ruffo, where I was sure the Bore wouldn't follow me, because I had chosen a movie which apparently had nothing to do with his subject. The title was *Friendship Is the Harbour of Joy*. Everything was quiet inside, and strange though it may seem, there wasn't a big audience in the theatre: just me and a few other people including a class of students from a local high school. That surprised me a bit, considering that Jonathan Dennis (the founding director of the New Zealand Film Archive, who passed away in 2002) had been a great friend of the Giornate and that the movie was dedicated to him.

Anyway, as there were some minutes left before the screening, I decided to relax a bit by reading, but before that I turned around to check if my tormentor was in. No trace of him! So I took a back seat and went on reading the *Symposium* by Plato. I got to the point where Socrates says that he owes all his knowledge to a revelation he had when he was young from the priestess Diotima from Mantinea, who initiated him into the mysteries of Eros by disclosing the truth to him, when suddenly the lights faded and I heard someone talking. It was Peter Wells the director of the film, who said just a few words to present it:

"This movie has to do with the beauty of moving images and with their persistence and I believe this story is not only about Jonathan, but it regards all the people who struggle to preserve moving images."

Then the theatre got dark and the movie began.

Shortly after the beginning I thought I heard the voice of a young man talking near me and making comments on the film. I heard him saying sentences such as those:

"...These images are so beautiful, they are not just about death, but also about life..."

"...Jonathan's house was so nice, the interiors so warm, so full of life, every object is so charming and it seems it's all there for a reason, not by chance. It feels like entering his privacy..."

"...That's incredible. There is a poster of the Musée du Cinema Henri Langlois in Paris on the wall in his house. It feels like an intentional reference to the film about Langlois I've just seen, where the Musée is mentioned and whose title was *The Phantom of the Cinémathèque*. These films seem to be playing an allusive game with me and highlighting as well the connection of cinema with death and ghosts..."

"...Or maybe they are just highlighting a link between two figures who were both full of life and enterprise and who were so passionate about cinema as to devote their life to it and to commit themselves to the creation of a film archive..."

At that point I looked round: I wanted to see where that voice saying those things was coming from, but I could see nobody. Oddly enough that voice sounded familiar, it sounded like the voice of the Bore but I was positive he was not around. However I couldn't believe that because I could hear it so close to me as if there was someone whispering these words in my ears. So either I was going mad, or there might be really someone behind me. Then I thought it was all due to the stress of the festival, so I went on watching the film, trying not to think about it, but there he went again and this time he said:

"...it's so beautiful the way it's told Jonathan's friendship with Witarina Harris, an old Maori lady who played in silents and who's now taking care of him. They are so sweet to one another...the way she's holding his hand and the loving way he watches her while she's sitting on the sofa and singing...

"...Great! There also are some beautiful shots from the silent film where Witarina starred in 1929, *Under the Southern Cross*...

"...what I read in the catalogue was true: this film is made just like a silent film, because the images are so strong, they speak by themselves, they don't need any comment or voice-over, it has been shot without recording any music onto it, the sound is often off or it's often just images and sounds put together... .. I think that a festival devoted to silent films, like the Giornate, is a perfect showcase for it because, even though the documentary was made in 2004, it is a great homage to silent film too...Indeed this is a movie of exceptional beauty and more people definitely should have seen it!..."

Then I turned round again, sure that this time I would hunt out the big talker, but once more there was no one. Strange as it may seem, though, that voice still resembled that of the Bore but at the same time the more the time went by, the more it also sounded like an inner voice, like my own voice and it went on commenting like that:

"...Jonathan's house was so colourful...

"...Outside the windows there are shots of children playing, people walking or busy in their daily affairs... Life goes on outside despite the fact that death is taking over inside this house...

"...In his house there are so many nice, meaningful objects, pillows, pictures of people he loved, Maori amulets and seashells...

"...November 20<sup>th</sup> 2001, during one of his last interviews Jonathan talks about himself and while he speaks we see some more images of the house, of the lush vegetation growing outside, in his garden...the camera focuses on little details, leaves, flowers and their colours are so bright.. ...such a sense of life comes out of them, it seems life is exploding out of them, out of the film, in our face...

"...Gosh! So many flowers ! So much life in them! What a striking contrast with the idea of death! No. Perhaps it's not in contrast! It's part of it, life and death together!...

"...It feels so strange when I catch Jonathan's eye in the camera, it's so strong when he looks straight into the camera while he gets ready to talk for the interview. At some point he adjusts the camera in front of him and he stares at it in silence. And it feels like he's watching us and I can feel his distress and emotion and then...unexpectedly HE SMILES!

"...Maybe he knew this might be his last interview... And now he's dead! And that hits me so much, just like a bloody punch in my stomach...

"...he says that it was September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 the day he was told his diagnosis... (what a coincidence!)..

"...while we hear him talking so bravely about the terrible disease that will kill him, the camera keeps on showing silent images, so significant and full of life, little details of his house like a curtain by the window moving slowly, blown by a gentle breeze...or some more scenes of life in the street we can see from that window: images of people, of children...it's a sunny day...

"...it feels like we're in that house as well, listening to the thoughts of someone who can watch life only from afar, from a window, but who contemplates it with a smile...

"...on January 15<sup>th</sup> 2002, soon after giving his last interview Jonathan lost consciousness...

"..in this case one can really see death at work...there is a shot of Jonathan lying unconscious in bed and his family and friends are keeping vigil by his bedside... and he is dying!...

"...All this is too distressing for me. I can't take it any longer. I'm not used to seeing death, confronting it, having to deal with it!"

At that moment I heard someone crying. I looked round but again I could see nobody. Then I definitely started to feel uneasy and awkward and I finally heard even more loud and clear:

"...Jonathan is unconscious, but he's surrounded by his friends, including Witarina who is sitting on his bed beside him... and they are singing sweet Maori songs while they stay with him..."

"...there's so much life and death mixed together in that room...such a contrast between the life around Jonathan and the death which is coming to get him..

"...some more images from the street nearby, so full of life...

"...Jonathan died 9 days after, on January 24<sup>th</sup> 2002...

"...at the end a beautiful shot of Witarina looking at a pillow on which has been printed a picture of Jonathan and her and she kisses it with a smile... Friendship is the harbour of joy..."

And suddenly I felt my cheeks were wet and that I was shedding tears as well. And when the lights went on I realised that I was sitting alone and that no one else was crying but me. Then I finally understood.

It was me the one who I had heard crying before. Then I also was the one who was talking, who had been talking all the time since the very beginning of the film. I realised then that my hated tormentor, who had haunted me and made all the interviews during the festival, was nobody else but me and my conscience.

What a strange revelation!

But why had the admission happened at that very moment?

Maybe because the film about Jonathan had forced me to pull down my rational defences and to acknowledge my emotions, and the tears that it had torn away from me had allowed my true feelings to come out and compelled me to that final recognition.

But which particular shot had provoked such a strong reaction?

Definitively it had been the shot where Jonathan looks directly into the camera. Watching his moved and yet serene and firm expression while he stares at us, thinking that such a lively look would have been burnt out in a few weeks, perceiving the vitality, seeing the beauty of this person and realizing just thanks to a glance how many things he would still have had to say, to give and that I would have never had the chance to meet him, apart from making me burst into tears and reminding me of how wonderful, unique, fragile, and yet precious and perfect and yet mortal we humans all are, this had given me the ultimate answer I had been looking for throughout the festival by asking questions to all the people I had met.

In fact I also wondered what if someone who's being filmed knew that in that very moment one is recording what might be the last image of oneself alive and that this is the way one is going to be remembered by posterity. Would one act differently? The answer lies in Jonathan's smiling look. Because it seems the look, as Peter Wells wonderfully expressed it in the catalogue, "*...of someone who has contemplated and even moved beyond his own death...*" and thanks to that look I could get in touch with him somehow.

Truly this film had made him so alive to my eyes that I couldn't fool myself anymore into believing that cinema had to do only with dead and ghosts, because despite knowing that I was watching a dead man, I felt he was giving me such deep emotions, just as if he were still alive.

It was a film which had revived him before my very eyes and I had cried watching the eyes of someone who is no longer with us and whom I had never met.

That showed me once more how the idea of life is connected with that of death and it convinced me once and for all that, as long as cinema retains the power to bring people back to life and to make us feel their spiritual richness and to let them be loved even by those who have never met them, it cannot be a medium regarding only death. It gave me the crucial piece of evidence that, as long as moving images are evocative enough to be able to convey the soul, the energy of another human being, thus enabling that person to communicate with us just through the eyes, then cinema can never be considered a dead art. I realised that it will never be something that deals only with death, because even the very moment it's talking about death, it's actually talking about life too, it's celebrating life, it's witnessing the vital power, the will to live and to last that belongs to every human and it's putting the living in contact with the dead, bringing them back to life.

Films are about life, they hold life in them, silents even more so and, quoting what Annette Michelson brilliantly said, as long as they have something contemporary for us, whatever it may be, we can't call them dead. Be it the gaze of one of the members of the first Soviet Government into the camera in Vertov's films, or the people waving outside the factory gates in the Mitchell and

Kenyon's movies (like the boy on the 2002 Giornate catalogue cover, whom David Robinson often refers to as "a star"), or the last glance that Jonathan Dennis casts on all of us in Peter Wells' documentary.

So I'd like to end by wishing: "Long live the films!", though they don't need my salute, because they are alive and there is life in each one of them as much as in each of us. We just have to let that life out and be ready to sense it and to receive it and to go on trying to find suitable space to let it show, just like this festival, which, as Rebecca Vick admirably said, is "*an appreciation of the art that celebrates the life in silent films*".

Finally after realising that, I suddenly thought: with all the material the Bore...oops...I have collected, with all the opinions that I have recorded, I could write the paper he intended to write (I'm still a bit mixed up and puzzled by all these switched identities) on the idea that David gave him/me. But what was it? Oh, yes! The immortality of the images!

However maybe it's a bit unrealistic on my side to think that I can manage to write something on that. If Zazie were here she would probably mock me and say: "Oui! The immortality of the images, mon c...!"

This paper is dedicated to all those who spend and have spent their lives in capturing life, recording it on moving images, producing, showing and preserving films, thus giving us a taste of the eternity, or of the immortality that humans have always longed for. It's also dedicated to all the movies that have shared with us their spark of life or that have made us laugh or spare a few tears, cherishing the dream that they'll keep on moving our emotions and that we'll be able to admire their magic for a long time to come.

Finally I would like to thank a lot all the people who have helped me and enable me to write this paper: Paolo Caneppele, Michela Zegna, Cecilia Cenciarelli, Luca Giuliani, David Robinson, David Mingay, Paolo Cherchi Usai, Annette Michelson, Aleksandr Deriabin, Tom Gunning, Paolo Mereghetti, Elaine Burrows, Pin Pin Tan, Neil Brand, Philip Carli, Margaret Cavallini, Rebecca Vick, William Martin, Francesca Angelucci, Julie Cazenave, Yuri Tsivian, Peter Wells, Thomas Christensen, Teresa Castro, Riccardo Costantini, Clyde Jeavons, Bryony Dixon, Vanessa Toulmin and above all Dziga Vertov, Henri Langlois and Jonathan Dennis. Last but not least my family and Toni. Special thanks to Gabrielle Lewkowicz for revising it.

jude cowan

## how was it for you?: silent cinema and the past

"For all of us there is a twilight zone between history and memory; between the past as a generalized record which is open to relatively dispassionate inspection and the past as a remembered part of, or background to, one's own life."<sup>viii</sup>

Eric Hobsbawm

At the 23<sup>rd</sup> Pordenone Silent Film Festival, collegian Gianpaolo Parmigiani proposed a central question for discussion: to reflect on the experience of viewing the dead as part of the contemporary encounter with the silent screen. His idea was received warmly by both new and veteran guests of the Giornate, who recognised the pivotal importance of this topic for lovers of early cinema.

This consideration of mortality and cinema reminded me of a question which occurred to me during the opening event, a special music presentation of Buster Keaton's *The General* (US 1927). How did concepts of cinema and mortality fuse in the imaginations of the pioneers and their audiences, in the early years of the moving pictures? From the start, movies were used to reproduce, extend and revitalise human life. This impulse was not restricted to the middle class, despite the interpretations of some commentaries on early film. The opportunity to encode a recent past appealed far beyond class boundaries.

At the Giornate I began to keep a special note of films that attempted to merge past and present in different ways. I wanted to concentrate on those works which dealt with history in ways different from other art forms. This meant that I had to separate those films that used the conventions of other media to interpret past generations. In this category I included the amusing romp *Robin Hood* (Éclair America, US, 1912), which is attributed to the likely provenance of Reginald De Koven's 1890 comic opera,<sup>4</sup> and also the incomplete *Triumph* (Bluebird Photoplays, Inc, US 1917). *Triumph's* story looked at the theatre's preoccupation with reconstructing the past - Lon Chaney's character had written a play set in the sixteenth century and stage performers were dressed in the historical costume.

I then decided to disregard these films, not only because they were mediated through theatrical conventions, but also since they dealt with the more distant past. Instead I selected cinema which was negotiating a recent past through fictional representations. These pieces were working with cultural memories which a younger generation of viewers would have associated with their older relations and acquaintances, such as grandparents, who would have had living experiences of direct relevance. I was interested in the representation of memories of the childhood of an older generation, in parallel to our encounter with the fascinating memories of guests Diana Serra Cary (known on screen as Baby Peggy) and Jack Cardiff, who recollected for us their working experiences in silent cinema as children.

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With these selection criteria in mind, I ended by concentrating the most well-known pieces from the selection screened this year. These were *The General* and *Birth of a Nation* (D W Griffith Corp/Majestic Motion Picture Co, US, 1915). These exceptional films were joined by the minor short *The Old Man and Jim* (Champion, US, 1911). Unlike the longer films, whose feature length drama and comedy was familiar in its structure, *Old Man's* re-interpretation of the lost art of the tableau was greeted with general astonishment and humour. It was unfamiliar. In particular, it was thought to be amusing as it demonstrated just how many people could be packed into a small space. The numbers seemed too many by present day standards, which indicates that acceptable distances of personal boundaries have lengthened from the time the film was made. *Old Man* had been filmed on an open air stage against painted backdrops, with family members weeping while gathered around the dying hero of the civil war. A particularly attractive 'wailer' was the very young child who made an enthusiastic (and adorable) performance with a handkerchief. The pile of dying corpses on the barricades of conflict, with the pageant figure of Liberty hovering above, used the tricks of cinematographic double exposure to enhance this moving picture interpretation of the Victorian stage tradition in which live performers had posed to imitate the grand narrative paintings. This piece, like *The General* and *Birth*, took as its subject the Civil War, a topic of primary interest for the audiences of the United States.

At the time of the silents, America was a land of immigrants for whom the cinema could transcend language boundaries. As diverse immigrant groups would draw upon diverse national histories to understand their personal identities, it is confusing to reflect on exactly what relevance the Civil War would have had in this context. Its makers seemed to have perceived it as a fable of national genesis for the USA, as *Birth* was retitled, dropping the name of its source, *The Clansman* (1905), Reverend Thomas Dixon's bigoted play. Its new title suggested a propagandist, national adventure, in which modern America was forged out of the crucible of civil war. Yet it was condemned on its release for its anti-black preoccupations. People rejected its underlying ideology, - and organisations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), demonstrated that they did not want this kind of history. Yet, at the same time, certain incidents were recognised as key moments in the nation's history, realising the generally promoted belief in the statesmanship of Abraham Lincoln. The intertitling exploited the camera's perceived impartiality to emphasise the witness of historical event. The words, 'historical facsimile' were repeatedly used to underpin the reputed physical authenticity of the reconstruction scenes. The film certainly dealt with recent history. Not only was it made only 50 years after the end of the Civil War, but it focused on an even more recent period, that of post-conflict reconstruction. This latter era shows the difficulty of making modern America out of civil war, seeming to bring out the most uncomfortable politics. Out of all the historical scenes portrayed, it was the assassination of Lincoln in Ford's Theatre which was the significant event that had triggered the chaos of reconstruction. Had the nation been irretrievably sickened by this violent act? Could it possibly be reborn in morality? This question recalled the shock of a previous generation. Older Americans of 1914 could recall having lived through the fall-out from John Wilkes Booth's fatal shot. On a more domestic front, *Birth* dealt with the experience of the women shouldering the privations of wartime economies. The 'southern ermine' or raw cotton with which the young sister decorated her frock to welcome home her war-wounded brother symbolised the poverty and pretensions of the wounded south. In these references, the emotionalism and narrative was empowered by the use of culturally emotive objects. These items deepened the significance of the mournful moment which compromised the happiness of the hero's return. By including this retrospective wartime experience of both sexes, *Birth* broadened its audience appeal.

Twelve years on, the audience of *The General* had passed through a significant time difference from those who witnessed *Birth*. Keaton's comedy shows what a decade can do, and not only in cinematic developments. With an aging generation, whose personal experience of war misery had been almost eclipsed by the battle horrors of the First World War, this twelve year gap had pushed the Civil War back into an archaic institution, the subject of more affection than horror. Despite the interposition of this watershed, the documentary quality of *The General* employed similar strategies to *Birth*. Both

films pay a cinematographic homage to the photographs of Matthew Brady (and others) which had in their day brought a ground-breaking pictorial realism to war reportage. Both films employed an epic scale and incurred an unrivalled cost in their respective genres - the scene from *The General* in which a collapsing bridge which caused the train to fall into the river was reputedly the most expensive shot in the whole of silent cinema. However, the festival programme notes state that the film was a 'commercial disaster', rejected by audiences and critics alike. Could one reason have been that for the generation of the late 1920s, the Civil War had lost its resonance for the post WW1 generation? If this history had mislaid its intense meaning for American audiences, had it become bad investment to strive for its grand authentic reconstruction?

Finally, the festival offered more forays back into nineteenth century morality, psychology and imagery through the other Griffithiana - *Home Sweet Home* (Majestic Motion Picture Co/Reliance Motion Picture Co, US, 1914), *Old Heidelberg* (Fine Arts Film Co, 1915) *Enoch Arden* (Majestic Motion Picture Co, US, 1915) and *The Awakened Conscience* (Majestic Motion Picture Co, US, 1914). This mixed bag of treats from Griffiths dealt with the nineteenth century past in different ways. *Home Sweet Home* was made up of different plots all based on the transformative power of the song which had been particularly popular in the Civil War. The theatrical wanderings of the lyrics writer were part of the overarching theme of the return of the prodigal son to the domestic sphere, the character posthumously redeemed by an angelic Lilian Gish on wires. The rather sickly Christian morality was very appropriately located in the nineteenth century settings, and feels more appropriate there than engaging with the modernity of the 1910s.

Trying to make the imaginative leap to enter the minds and hearts of the audiences of these silent movies, has been frustrating as well as exciting. It is possible to differentiate between the years and periods in which the films were released, to trace the sources and of inspiration back to relevant diverse art and documentary forms, and a dedicated historian can trace contemporary comment as revealed through the fragmentary and biased records preserved through a variety of documents. With these methodologies, an intelligent discussion on reception of films can be facilitated. But these tools are inadequate for evoking the experiential emotionalism of past generations. For the audiences who first witnessed these films, the hopes, desires and beliefs about who they were, and how they got to where they were, breathed life into flickering celluloid. However, I found a personal parallel in my own response to the festival experience of the missing art of silent cinema. At Sacile, we indulged in dreams of the past, clapping filmmaker Paul Leni's photograph at the conclusion of *The Cat and The Canary* (Universal Pictures, US, 1927). I found this group applause for the dead director very moving. We were also privileged to meet a main actor of silent cinema, the leading child star of *Helen's Babies* (Principal Pictures, US, 1924) and *Captain January* (Principal Pictures, US, 1924) and the living link she offered connected us with this lost period in which we all shared a fascination. This evoked the wonder that I imagine was felt by makers and viewers of silent cinema, for whom this new animated art was revisiting the lost generations of the remembered past, magically making the dead live again on the silent screen.

alyson hrynyk

## asquith rediscovered, OR in praise of hybrid films

### attenzione note

While the Pordenone Silent Film Festival gives its guests an opportunity to see films that most would not otherwise know or have access to, it also provides an opportunity to reassess the reputations of familiar directors and films, whether by showing less known works or screening familiar works in context. In this category, among the greatest re-discoveries of last year's festival were the silent films of Anthony Asquith: *Shooting Stars* (1928), *Underground* (1928), and *A Cottage on Dartmoor* (1929/30). I, for one, can think of few film viewing experiences as intense as the festival's screening of *A Cottage on Dartmoor*. While watching the film, I was also conscious of myself as part of a riveted audience, aware of our collective tension in anticipating each new plot twist and every inventive composition.

I am interested in exploring how the *Giornate* contributes to the process of historical re-evaluation, taking the Asquith films as my example. Twenty three years in operation, the festival has energized the revival of public interest in silent film and the historical turn in cinema studies as an academic discipline. By examining the conditions which led to the organization of this series, the historical record it aimed to challenge, and the reactions of viewers (including this one) at the festival, I hope to provide a case study of how films pass from the *Giornate* screens and into the canon, as well as make a modest contribution to the ongoing re-interpretation of these films.

Centerpieces of the series "Asquith and the Others: New Light on British Cinema," the Asquith films were selected with the express intention of helping to change the low international and academic reputation of British silent cinema. As Bryony Dixon, the series programmer from the British Film Institute informed me, the origin of the series began with the advent of the British Silent Cinema Weekends in Nottingham eight years ago. At the yearly event, UK film historians and enthusiasts gather to watch and discuss long-neglected British films collected by the BFI. Discovering that the films so often surpassed their reputation, plans were laid to bring the best of them to wider attention, thereby altering attitudes and reviving interest in the whole. Having selected a sample of the best films to have played at the Weekends, Sacile provided the perfect venue for an international "coming out" before an audience of notable archivists, academic film historians, critics, and silent film devotees.

And yet, it is ironic that Asquith should posthumously lend his name to such an endeavour. His silent-era films are in almost as much need of re-examination as those of the nameless, faceless "Others" in the series title. If Asquith is one of the few British directors of the 1920s whose name is remembered today, that reputation rests primarily on his sound-era films: tastefully directed but middlebrow theatrical adaptations such as *The Browning Version* (1950) and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1951), as well as star-studded international co-productions like *The VIPs* (1963). What standing Asquith's silent era films have amongst historians and critics is decidedly mixed. While Rachael Low, the first to produce an extensive survey history of British cinema, listed Asquith as one of three British directors of the 1920s to have "made outstanding films" (the others were, unsurprisingly, Alfred Hitchcock and John Grierson), she also claims that he "had not yet outgrown a precocious and rather derivative brilliance."<sup>ix</sup>

In this, Low restates the common opinion of Asquith's silent films that emerged in the late 1920s and 1930s: that their stylistic hybridity—their supposed imitateness of other European art cinemas—undercut both their value as art and as a contribution to the establishment of a national style. These same claims were frequently made in condemnation of British silent cinema as a whole.

If the general impression made by the films at the festival was any indication, however, Asquith's critics may have under-appreciated the director's degree of selectivity and control in his evocation of continental styles, the subtle differences in his use of such elements when compared with that of their progenitors, as well as the gains he achieves in expressivity. If as the participants in the Collegium's session on the series heard, British silent features might best be characterised by their eclecticism, connections with other arts, and internationally diverse casts and crew, then locating the terms on which Asquith's films can be appreciated may indeed point the way to a re-evaluation of the period as a whole.

### **Asquith in the Contemporary Historical Record**

François Truffaut's much-cited declaration that "there is a certain incompatibility between the terms 'cinema' and 'Britain'"<sup>x</sup> may be the most famous derisive statement about British cinema. Few may realize, however, that this attitude originates in the interwar period, and that its chief proponents were themselves Britons. These included the predominantly British editors and contributors to the journal *Close Up*, and Paul Rotha, whose *The Film Till Now* was the first English-language international film history. Proponents of what David Bordwell has called the "Standard Version" of film history, these authors espoused a neo-Hegelian and neo-Kantian approach that valued films as instantiations of a national spirit and for exploring the essence of their medium.<sup>xi</sup> With the terms of evaluation defined in this way, the British industry could not but compare poorly to its European and American rivals, and Asquith, one of its leading lights, was a favourite target.

Having no characteristic style and few of the institutional or intellectual supports to define one relative to other those of major European national cinemas, the British cinema was continually criticized for "imitating" either Hollywood or other European styles. British silent cinema, in Rotha's interpretation, by lacking an avant-garde, a school of film theory, or an "enthusiasm for the progress of the cinema," consequently lacked a "nationality." "The British film," he wrote, "has never been self-sufficient, in that it has never achieved its independence... It has no other aim that that of the imitation of the cinema of other countries."<sup>xii</sup>

Much of this writing was polemical, its aim to goad British producers, directors, and technicians into creating a modernist but still recognizably British film movement to match those of Russia, Germany, or France. Like most polemics, however, its overall tone was pessimistic. *Close Up* editor Kenneth Macpherson wrote in his "As Is" column in the journal's first edition:

All this big talk, for instance about an English film revival. It is no good pretending one has any feeling of hope about it... England is going to start, not with any new angle, not with any experiment, to go on trundling in wake, not deplorably perhaps, one hopes efficiently, but with a complete acceptance of the film convention as is... The truth is that the average attitude of England and the English to art is so wholly nonchalant and clownish that it is quite useless to expect any art to indigenously flower there... One can see that the English revival will be exactly along old lines. They are going to imitate. And unhappily the English thing has neither the *weltgeist* quality of the German nor the exactness of the American, both of which are fundamentally national. I haven't found out quite what the English quality is, but having seen all its principal films I hesitate to try to name it.<sup>xiii</sup>

Asquith's upper-class background, Oxford education, and interest in art film movements placed him in a somewhat privileged position within the British industry: a situation one might have expected to insulate him from such criticism. As the son of the former Liberal Prime Minister Herbert Asquith, the younger Asquith could presumably have entered any field. Having become a movie enthusiast in his student days, he chose the new and still-disreputable world of film production. Through family contacts, after his graduation, Asquith was able to spend six months in Hollywood studying production techniques, meeting figures such as Charlie Chaplin. Upon his return in 1925, he sought work at British Instructional Films, and did every kind of job there, from assisting with scripts and make-up, to stunt-work, and assistant direction. In the same year, Asquith became a founding member of the Film Society, a London-based organization that mounted monthly screenings of new European studio and avant-garde films, as well as revivals, typically American serials, slapstick comedies, and early features. The Society was subscription-based to circumvent government censorship regulations that kept many continental films off British screens, and secured its prints

through personal relationships and visits with directors, film companies, and similar societies, particularly the Vieux-Colombier in Paris and the Film Arts Guild in New York.<sup>xiv</sup> Asquith even made one film in Germany, *The Runaway Princess* (1928), at Laenderfilm Studios in Berlin.

Nonetheless, Asquith was one of the few British directors singled out by name for condemnation in *Close Up* and *The Film Till Now*. Certainly, Asquith's class status and rapid rise in the industry garnered some hostility. It was not uncommon for left-leaning critics such as *Close Up*'s Harry Alan Potamkin to take Asquith to task for being "old-fashioned in [his] progressiveness" and not making *Underground* a "document of the lives of the Underground people," or to complain that Asquith required a longer apprenticeship and smaller assignments to complete his film education.<sup>xv</sup>

Setting politics aside, Asquith's films—even when they were qualifiedly praised by these authors—were commonly singled out for demonstrating the very qualities that made the British inferior to other European cinemas. Asquith, it seems, provided a recognisable focal point for the anti-British cinema polemics: an exemplar of everything they considered to be wrong with British cinema, and then some. One gets the impression that Asquith received so much derision because he, in his critics' opinion, was wasting his talents by making the wrong kind of film in the wrong way, and consequently providing a poor model for other British directors.

The standard contemporary interpretation was that Asquith was technically proficient, even inventive at times, but that he had not yet matured as a director. As in the appraisal of British filmmaking as a whole, what style his films did possess was considered derivative and incoherent: imitative at times of other styles and flawed by its lack of unity. Rotha asserted that Asquith "ha[d] learnt varied forms of treatment from abroad, but that he ha[d] not as yet fully understood the logical reason for using them." "His technique... remains... primitively on the surface" and the "quick cutting and symbolic reference" in his films was "employed because of themselves and not as a contributory factor to the film composition." As a result, Asquith appeared to him a "virtuoso": someone whose technique is decorative and draws attention to it rather than being an organic part of the whole, and who is clever rather than wise.<sup>xvi</sup>

Potamkin, writing a few years earlier and thus the likely model for Rotha's interpretation, also implied that the problem with Asquith's films was a lack of consistent and appropriate relation between their form and content. He criticized *Underground* in particular as "a hybrid film produced by a coincidence of absence of a precise cinema viewpoint and a remoteness from the lives of the protagonists of the narrative."<sup>xvii</sup>

By "lack of viewpoint," Potamkin appears to have had two different problems in mind. The first, he called a problem of "Conception." Asquith, he claimed, emphasized film "treatment" (the continuity or shot plan) over "plot" (the progressive forward movement and shaping of the narrative), when the true challenge of filmmaking was relating treatment to the "content." "Your indifference, Mr. Asquith, to the plot, as you term it," Potamkin intoned, "allowed *Underground* to begin as a light superficial comedy (which, I think, you should have kept it), pass into the idyllic, the quasi-pathetic, the arrantly melodramatic, so that it was nothing as an experience and unreal as a revelation of the people it purported to represent."<sup>xviii</sup> Thus Potamkin's first objection was that the film did not maintain or develop a consistent genre and tone according to dramatic conventions, but instead varied them according to the demands of the sequence or scene.

Potamkin's second major criticism of Asquith concerns the motivation of camera position. This more expected meaning of viewpoint emerges in a later article called "Phases of Cinema Unity," in which Asquith is used as the lead negative example. Potamkin begins by quoting a statement by the director on camera positioning:

Roughly speaking, there seem to be three occasions where an unusual camera position is justified. First of all, where the point of view of one of the characters is represented. By imposing on the audience his physical point of view of the person, the director is putting it in touch with his mental state as well..., Secondly, it would be legitimate to use an unusual angle to intensify a dramatic moment even if the 'shot' represents no one's point of view... Lastly, the director may legitimately choose an unusual camera position to compose a good picture... But such occasions, unwarranted apparently by logic or drama are more difficult to justify. A plea of aesthetic logic does not affect the resolutely common-sense critic of Cézanne's precarious apples. *And such 'shots' are only right in a film the whole texture of which is pictorial...*

By admittedly applying italics to the last statement, Potamkin apparently aimed to call Asquith on not following his own aesthetic principles, thus using him as an example of a director who does not submit his choice of camera positions in his treatments to an overall principle of unity. Potamkin explains his own principle of unity this way: "*The entire film must be preconceived in anticipation of each detail!*" "There is a more demanding logic," he wrote, "than the logic of the psychology of a character at any moment or the logic of the dramatic moment. There is the rhythmic structure of the unit determining the moment. No such thing as a 'shot' exists in the aesthetic sense of the cinema... Films are rhythms [sic.] that commence and proceed, in which—ideally—every moment, every point, refers back to all that has proceeded and forward to all that follows."<sup>xxix</sup>

Following these principles, Potamkin concludes "*Underground* is hardly a film of sustained unity" for it is "replete with momentary reproaches not called for by the totality."<sup>xxx</sup> He does not entertain the possibility that Asquith considered his films in whole or in part pictorial, or that there may be a cinematic value to allowing character psychology or a dramatic moment at times to trump the overall rhythm of the film.

Moreover, Potamkin's neo-Kantian emphasis on unity strikes me as a type of formalism more applicable to older plastic arts such as painting or sculpture—arts that are stationary, atemporal, and composed of relatively few elements in which part-to-whole relations are more easily discernable. In his notion of editing, for example, he combines the fundamental Soviet idea of montage as an assemblage of shots with a French Impressionist use of the musical metaphor of rhythm to describe film's temporal dimension. In simplifying the complexities of these ideas and indiscriminately mixing them, Potamkin loses some of the subtlety and sense of ineffableness in the experience of film spectatorship that emerges in the best versions of both theories. Although Sergei Eisenstein, too, has an organic notion of the relation of the shot to the whole film (notably, he insists that "the shot is by no means an *element* of montage" but rather "a montage *cell*"), he develops this premise to try to express the sense of a "dialectical leap" to "a phenomenon of another order" that takes place between cell and organism, shot and film.<sup>xxxi</sup> Similarly, the French critic Léon Moussinac espouses a concept of rhythm that tries to capture the effects of the interplay between the shot and its context:

If, in a film, the images have to possess a particular beauty and value in and of themselves, beyond their significance in relation to the whole, this beauty and value can be singularly diminished or increased according to the role those images are given in time, that is, the order in which they succeed one another.<sup>xxii</sup>

Rather than highlighting the mystery of creation and the unanticipated revelations of beauty in particular images, as Eisenstein and Moussinac do - pleasures that belong to the director or the spectator, Potamkin's theory of cinematic unity emphasizes the perception of formal harmonies between part and whole - a decidedly rational and intellectually-distanced type of pleasure.

### **A Defense of the Hybrid Film: Some Reflections on Asquith's Aesthetics**

Having clarified the terms upon which Rotha and the contributors to *Close Up* established the reputations of British silent cinema in general and Asquith in particular, I would like to reconsider a few of these received opinions using a few examples from the films. In doing so, it is not my intention to heap scorn on this tradition. Rotha is a capable summarizer of the work of the serious film writing of his day, and Potamkin is a competent critic and in touch with the intellectual approaches of his era. Their objections to *Underground* in particular are carefully observed and certainly not without value. In comparison to the greatness of *A Cottage on Dartmoor*, Rotha is undoubtedly correct that the earlier film fails to achieve a certain level of profundity due to its lack of a significant theme to undergird its visual inventiveness.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Looking back at these writings with the perspective of the present day, however, helps bring into relief the incommensurability of the neo-Kantian and neo-Hegelian critical tradition with the motley styles of British silent film. To some extent, this gap is heightened by the differences between theories expounded by critics, whose thinking is often shaped by what is—by pre-existing aesthetic discourses and by pre-existing films--, and the creations of filmmakers, who are interested in what might be, and who bring to their work their own intuitive and practical sense of how to do things, even if this is based on the theories and films of others. In addition, the professionalization of film

archiving and film history means that today's critics and historians are more open to appreciating a wider array of styles, including those that do not necessarily accord with canons of taste, contribute to the steady development of the medium, or belong to the majority impulse. In a strange sense, the *Giornate* audience—composed of a motley array of people of differing nationalities united by their knowledge and love of silent film—is in some ways a more ideal audience for these films than they may have received in their own day.

As we have seen, Potamkin's theory of cinematic unity leaves unexplored the aesthetics and pleasures afforded by the pictorial tradition of filmmaking. The defining characteristic of pictorialism is the practice of displaying a narrative or dramatic moment as a picture or as a series of pictures. This, I believe, may lie at the root of Potamkin's critique of Asquith's films, as well as the claim that British cinema is 'uncinematic.' British cinema may have been considered as such because it maintained a strong strain of pictorialism after World War I, when in continental Europe, the end of the war and the socialist revolutions that followed gave impetus to emerging modernist movements, leaving behind the highly pictorial symbolist aesthetic that had previously influenced French and Russian filmmaking.

Rather than being a virtuoso who does not yet understand the fundamentals of his medium, I suggest that Asquith employs the wide range of techniques developed by European art movements—of camera movement, framing, lighting, *mise-en-scène*, and rhetorical structures—to enlarge the expressive capacities of his own pictorial cinematic tradition. Rather than being tacked on like new mouldings on old furniture, these techniques supplemented the methods of an established cinematic culture, and being dependent on its ability to create effects, pictorialism is notoriously hungry for new means of expression. Asquith's unjustified emphasis on treatment could likewise be viewed as an interest in conveying particular effects: in creating visually-striking and emotionally-affecting pictures that crystallize an emotion or an idea, or afford a pleasure of their own. Instead of contravening dramatic conventions, these effects could - if carefully chosen, placed and modulated for dramatic or emotional effect - mark key moments in the plot, thus propelling the drama forward and drawing the spectator in.

The most memorable elements of Asquith's silent films - their compositional and narrative unpredictability and inventiveness, attentiveness to complex social interactions, rich character psychology, invocation of intertexts, and dramatic scenes set in important landmarks and characteristically modern public spaces such as underground carriages, cinemas, beauty salons, rooming houses or department stores - are central to his aesthetics precisely because they are both evocative and memorable on their own, and made more so through careful plotting. Although in narrative terms, *A Cottage on Dartmoor's* main line of action is punctuated by an extremely long flashback - to when Joe, Sally, and her husband met years before in a small-town beauty salon and Joe wounds Sally's fiancé with a razor - dramatically, it is structured around several affecting "situations" in which "an unstable constellation of forces" come together: Joe's arrival at the cottage, Joe's date with Sally, the cinema scene, or the attempted murder.<sup>xiv</sup> The story events are arranged in this way so that the film builds dramatically from the climax of the flashback—the attempted murder—to the climax of the film. Will Joe make good on his threat to kill Sally's husband? What will she do? Conjoining these events in this way helps to transfer the tension of the previous scene to the finale and place the audience even more in the thrall of the film.

Likewise, the film's most bravura uses of technique are clustered around and thus in the service of these situations. Right before Joe's attack on Sally's fiancé, for example, a series of quick cuts shows a frayed rope snapping, guns firing, and a frame of red. Regarded as a whole, moreover, this entire last scene in the salon develops as a series of dramatic peaks and valleys, each crystallized with a particularly striking composition, from the argument between the female manicurists positioned, to the use of cut-aways to found footage of sporting events to demonstrate Joe's focus or lack of focus on his client, on forward to the attack. Such techniques also offer insight into the thoughts or feelings of the characters, but in a playful and open-ended way which allows viewers to add to the emotional tenor and meaning of a situation by developing their own interpretations. The spat between the female manicurists augments our sense of Joe's desperate and unstable emotional state following his discovery in the previous scene that Sally has accepted her suitor's proposal. Like a see-saw upon two bickering toddlers yell at each other, pumping harder with every

accusation, the shot/reverse shot editing pattern used to shoot the two women echoes the back-and-forth motion Joe uses to sharpen his razor. The blocking of the situation, with the women placed on either side of Joe, and the rhythms of both motions serve to reinforce each other. The zeal among many British critics for modernist film aesthetics and the intensity of their dismay over British film culture might, then, be interpreted as an anxious symptom over their nation's perceived comparative aesthetic and political backwardness relative to that of other major European countries. They feared either being late-adopters of the modernist film aesthetics that promised to define the essence, as well as the future, of the medium, or, if the cause of film art should fail, of having the home market completely dominated by American commercial cinema. Being by temperament, education, and political affiliation on the side of the artistic and political vanguard, they opted for the former. British cinema had to be remade in order to compete for international recognition. Pictorialism, then, had to be squelched at all costs. This is one of the many instances, however, in which the late adopter is far more doctrinaire in its espousal of a principle than its progenitors. How ironic that many of the directors and theorists these critics admired, such as Eisenstein, were more heterodox in their thinking and stylistics than to be strictly modernists. How fortunate for us that they may have been ultimately unsuccessful in their campaign.

I wish to express my gratitude to Bryony Dixon, Christine Gledhill, and Mark Fuller for agreeing to be interviewed for this paper and their suggestions of additional sources. I also wish to thank Scott Curtis for bringing *Underground* and *A Cottage on Dartmoor* to Northwestern University's Block Cinema, introducing them to a wider audience, and providing me with the opportunity to view these films again.

<sup>1</sup> Rachael Low, *The History of British Film, Vol. IV: The History of British Film 1918-1929* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 308, 309.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Roy Armes, *A Critical History of the British Cinema* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1978) n. pag.

<sup>1</sup> David Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), ch 2.

<sup>1</sup> Paul Rotha, *The Film Till Now: A Survey of World Cinema*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London: Spring Books, 1967), p. 313-14.

<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Macpherson, "As Is," (Vol. I no. 1, July 1927), *Close Up 1927-33: Cinema and Modernism*, eds. James Donald, Anne Friedberg, and Laura Marcus (London: Cassell, 1998), p. 37.

<sup>1</sup> Jamie Sexton, "The Film Society and the Creation of an Alternative Film Culture in Britain in the 1920s," *Young and Innocent?: The Cinema in Britain 1896-1930*, ed. Andrew Higson (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002), p. 293-94.

<sup>1</sup> Harry Alan Potamkin, "The English Cinema," *Close Up*, Vol. IV no. 3 (March 1929), p. 27, 26, 23.

<sup>1</sup> Rotha, *The Film Till Now*, p. 320.

<sup>1</sup> Potamkin, "The English Cinema," p. 22.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>1</sup> Potamkin, "Phases of Cinema Unity," *Close Up*, Vol, IV no. 5 (May 1929), p. 27-28. Unfortunately, Potamkin does not cite the source of this quote, and I was unable to locate it.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>1</sup> Sergei Eisenstein, "The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram," *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, ed. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1947), p. 17.

<sup>1</sup> Léon Moussinac, "On Cinegraphic Rhythm," in *French Film Theory and Criticism 1907-1939, Volume I: 1907-1929*, ed. Richard Abel (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 280.

<sup>1</sup> Christine Gledhill's "Between Melodrama and Realism: Anthony Asquith's *Underground* and King Vidor's *The Crowd*," argues that *Underground* negotiates the threat of working-class masculinity, represented by Bert, to women living and working independent in the city by privileging the romance of the upwardly-mobile, more classically beautiful couple Bill and Nell, who marry by the

film's final scene. Published in *Classical Hollywood Cinema: The Paradigm Wars*, ed. Jane Gaines (Durham, N.C; London: Duke University Press, 1992), p. 129-67.

<sup>1</sup> Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs, *Theatre to Cinema: Stage Pictorialism and the Early Feature Film* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 23.

kelly-anne robinson

## 'the englishman is afraid of experience. he is suspicious of emotion': the asquith silents at the 23<sup>rd</sup> pordenone silent film festival

### attenzione note

This essay was inspired by a discussion held at the Collegium entitled 'Asquith and the Others: Understanding British Silent Cinema'. I want to consider, through an analyses of Asquith's silent films, some of the factors that arose from these discussions and from subsequent interviews conducted with people on the panel or associated in some way with the films screened. First, I will look at my own impressions of British film in the 1920s before I attended the festival.

As I made my way through old notepads recently, I came across my notes from a lecture entitled 'British Cinema in the 1920s' given at a University nearly a decade ago. I had written that British cinema was a 'complex entity' and that it 'tends to be *bluntly* remarked upon...Britain has made a substantial contribution to the medium' but its 'early significance declined'; 'Pioneer filmmakers failed to adjust to profoundly changing cinema (small-scale cottage to big business)'. Cecil Hepworth, I was informed, 'had an antiquated approach to cinema compared to America'. To illustrate these points, clips were screened from *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (Rex Ingram, 1921) and *Comin' Thro' the Rye* (Cecil Hepworth, 1923). My notes for the former included: 'Valentino having an affair! Her gloves give him away!' And for the latter: 'Historical drama, elaborate clothes, restrained acting. Set in lawns of old house, romantic - not very sexy'. I was clearly excited far more by *The Four Horseman*; both the star and the development of the story are immediately enticing. In contrast, my notes for *Comin' Thro'* are rather staid, more detailed and less carried away by the drama enacted on the screen. The chosen scenes are then broken down shot by shot and a conclusion is drawn. It is argued, whereas *The Four Horseman* breaks each scene into its 'dramatic purpose', the Hepworth film has a tableau style, which is 'slow and old fashioned'. This was my first experience of British silent film. Around the same time I watched *The Lodger* (1927) and presumed that this was one of a kind - Hitchcock, the auteur, overcoming the 'backwardness' of the British industry with the sheer force of his personality. Many years later I went to see a British silent film at the cinema for the first time, *The Constant Nymph* (Adrian Brunel, 1928). It was screened as part of the 'Between Passion and Restraint' season at the National Film Theatre curated by Bryony Dixon in 2003. I remember being quite shocked that it was a British film - it had star appeal (Novello) and looked thoroughly 'modern'. I also remember thinking again that it must be just 'one of a kind'. But I was intrigued and it was at this point that my re-evaluation of British cinema started to take place.

My lack of interest in British silent cinema stemmed from two things; most of the critical reading I had undertaken (of which there is still very little) was dismissive of the period; and I could count the number of films I had seen on one hand. To understand why so much British cinema has been neglected it is useful to look at the origins of British film criticism. Many writers on the cinema in the 20s and 30s, including Paul Rotha, C.A. Lejeune, Ernest Lindgren, John Grierson and those associated with the journal *Close-Up* (writers who I have often looked to for an understanding of this period) were highly critical of British film. It didn't have either the appeal of Hollywood or the artistry of German and Russian films. As early as 1926, Iris Barry said in *Lets Go To the Pictures* that Britain could compete in documentary filmmaking (in this sense the actuality film) although not in much else. Frequently cited histories of British film, spanning six decades, through Paul Rotha's *The Film Till Now* (the first edition 1930), Michael Balcon's *Twenty Years of British Film: 1925-1945* (1947), C.A. Oakley's *Where We Came In* (1964) and Rachel Low's *History of British Film* (1948 -

1985) are united in their lack of enthusiasm for filmmaking in the 1920s, excepting the documentary film. A British cinema, they argued, should be socially responsible. It should reflect the lives of the people. Although there has been a remarkable amount of varied writing on the cinema these writers seem to have influenced dominant critical opinion on British cinema since. For many years then these batons of distaste were handed down to new historians and I myself picked them up. I wrote an essay on the coming of sound to Britain where I dismissed all quota quickies although I hadn't seen one. As Bryony Dixon said to me: 'Many of the people who dismiss British cinema do this on hearsay rather than from knowledge of the films'.

It seems somewhat contradictory that many of the people I have mentioned were involved with The Film Society. During the 1920s, there emerged a critical and theoretical concern with cinema as a modern form and The Film Society is a product of these developments. It started in 1925 and its agenda was to screen films that otherwise wouldn't get shown. The films screened included canonised classics of the silent period, many associated with German Expressionism and Soviet Montage. These films were very popular with the Society and championed by the critics, yet they were films where style often overwhelmed content, quite the opposite to what many writers were calling for in British film. Wiene's *Caligari*, Eisenstein's *Potemkin*, the rest of Europe's filmmakers were seemingly helping to create a distinct national identity through the medium of film. Britain's critics also wanted something to call their own and they championed the word that would haunt British film criticism for years to come: Restraint.

So how do Anthony Asquith's films fit into this? Well, quite conveniently if we disregard his earlier career. Asquith became quite notorious for not putting a personal stamp on his film (a *Cahiers* 'metteur en scene' as opposed to an 'auteur' in British cinema). In *The Times*, C.A Lejeune praised *The Way to the Stars* (1945) for its 'emotional restraint... with the feeling that never spills over.' A film such as this came to signify this specifically British ideal in films. It was a film that threw Lindsay Anderson into such vehemence in his diaries for its 'complacency of the 'typically English' type; the inhibitions, the smugness, the goodness of it all!' Yet Asquith's silent films can't be pigeonholed quite so easily, hence their critical neglect perhaps?

The 1920s were an extraordinary period for British film. The cottage industry had been transformed with help from big business and the 1927 Quota Act. There was a boom in production and large vertically integrated companies such as Gaumont British and British International Pictures were created. As part of the Film Europe endeavour, co-productions between Britain and Germany were popular and exchanges of production personnel became commonplace. Asquith is situated directly in this specific national historical-cultural context and it is reflected in his films. In contrast to the distinctive lack of style in his later films (this is not a criticism), the silent films are united by their extraordinary formal and persistent thematic qualities, perhaps attributable to a variety of early influences on Asquith.

Before he made these films, Asquith spent six months in America watching Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks at the Fairbanks studio. Chaplin (who lived next door to the Fairbanks) was making *The Circus* (1928) at the time and Asquith also visited his set. According to R.J. Minney in his biography of Asquith they argued about 'a scene in Dupont's film *Vaudeville*, which showed a jealous trapeze artist with murder in his heart, swinging over the audience':

'Dupont,' said Puffin talking of it later, 'did not show the scene objectively, but put his camera on the trapeze so that one had the feeling that one was in fact seeing through the eyes of the character concerned. Charlie thought this merely an irritating trick. To him any odd cinema angle, any transposition of a shot which was so striking as *to draw attention to itself*, was not expressive but merely a distraction. He mentioned that such devices took the attention of the audience away from what was all-important – the doings and feelings of the people. I remember I argued that, for example, if some one in a story was terrified, you could help the actor by not making him express terror with his face, but by making what he saw look terrifying. Of course we were both right about the really fundamental thing – the paramount importance of the human element.<sup>xxv</sup>

Perhaps the influence of Hollywood can be felt in Asquith's silent films - in the fast-paced cutting and the gripping, melodramatic plots. But Asquith was also one of the founding members of The Film Society and was well aware of the stylistic experiments taking place abroad. Before shooting *Cottage*

on *Dartmoor* (1929/30) he worked on a German co-production, *The Runaway Princess* (1929, co-directed with Fritz Wendhausen) where he would have been exposed to German working methods. A German, Karl Fischer, lit *Shooting Stars* (1928) and *Underground* (1928) and *A Cottage on Dartmoor* was a joint Anglo-Swedish film, shot by a Swedish cinematographer, Axel Lindblom. These films represent the potential ideal for British films discussed at the time of a combination of Hollywood narrative and European style in an endeavour to reach the widest possible audience.

During the collegium session a discussion arose around the influence of Europe and America on British cinema. Christine Gledhill had opened the collegium arguing for the need to consider cinema in its own cultural context in a positive way. In Britain's case, its relationship to theatre and the pictorial arts. She said that we needed to let go of the notion of 'pure cinema'. She gave as an example Asquith's *Underground* and its relationship to 18<sup>th</sup> century painting and placement of figure. She argued that Asquith was not filming an unobserved social history like Dziga Vertov (whose films also featured in this year's Giornate programme) and that social class spaces had already been represented. For filmmakers it was difficult to construct a character without an assigned social condition, and class boundaries in Asquith's films are clearly demarcated. She argued that filmmakers used a different style to represent different social arenas. Bryony Dixon disagreed and said that in the three Asquith films there was a lack of class difference. Bryony emphasised the international influences on the film and suggested celebrating its complexity. I believe that Christine's comments can be applied to British cinema in the early 20s, where they usefully contradict the 'backward' or 'primitive' description often applied to these films. But much of British cinema in the late 20s is more complex than her cultural frameworks provide and resist such containment. The insularity of the early 20s contrasts markedly to the openness to international filmmaking in the latter part of the 20s and Asquith's films, in particular, are striking for their readiness to experiment. To illustrate these transformations I will look more closely at Asquith's silent 'trilogy': *Shooting Stars*, *Underground* and *Cottage on Dartmoor*.

My perception of British cinema in this period has been transformed by my experiences at the Giornate. I want to acknowledge the importance of seeing these films in the context of the festival. I have since watched *Cottage* again on a Steenbeck and although still clearly brilliant it doesn't compare to viewing it in Sacile. The sensations of watching these films with an enthusiastic audience on a large screen with live musical accompaniment are integral to experiencing the films. The opening of *Cottage on Dartmoor* is breathtakingly dynamic and needs a large screen to do justice to the image. Joe (the escaped convict) frequently drops into the frame, in one instance, his foot splashing into puddles directly in front of the camera. The horizon consists of contorted trees, smoke rising from the earth, the sun peaking from behind a cloud. There is a powerful Eisensteinian shot – as Joe rests for a moment on a rock. The land is black - a pool of light holds a reflection of the sky. Cut to another pool of light in which a woman bathes a child. Asquith uses cross cutting between this idyllic home and the desperate fugitive in an expressionistic landscape, to create dynamic tensions. Mother and child are blissfully unaware of oncoming threat. The opening sequence ends as follows. Sally seems to sense danger. She holds some fabric up to the light and pauses:

1. Mid-shot: Sally pricks her finger. Finger to mouth. Looks up and off screen
2. Mid-shot: Joe's figure in shadow. Looks like a ghoul. Face in darkness. Head tipped down. Eyes glaring. Arms pulled down straight
3. Close-up: Sally's eyes widen. Puts finger in mouth. A deep intake of breath.
4. Camera zooms into close-up of Joe
5. Repeat shot 3.
6. Intertitle: "Joe!"
7. Flashback. Cut to a very different Joe at beauticians. Brightly lit. Turns towards the camera dressed in white.
8. Intertitle: "Yes, Sally?"

This opening sequence shows the skill with which people and places are presented. I suspect it was fairly innovative to have incorporated the flashback in this way – a simple cut, without warning. It is

thrilling and enigmatic and completely trusting of the audience. This is an excellent example of Asquith's ability to exploit cinema's unique qualities, particularly space and time on which I will elaborate later. This opening sequence looks like a cross between Dovchenko's *Earth* and Wiene's *Caligari* with cutting by Griffith - the point being I suppose that you cannot 'fix' them; you could just as well argue a link with Sjöström because of Axel Lindblom. When one does endeavour to decipher the influences on this opening, the cultural frame of references feels international and 'cinematic'. In the Collegium, Gledhill suggested that characters are often shot in a different style according to their social class. So, for example, the lower class characters in *Underground* (the couple that do not have clearly defined jobs) are shot much of the time in shadow. But I would argue that shadow in *Underground* is less an example of class difference than an attempt to express the emotion of its characters. For example, in the shot of Kate on the banister: she has a shadow covering her forehead but then moves into the light. It is more likely that this effect was an attempt to express her realisation of her mistreatment at Bert's hands than to put her in her place socially. Bert is often shot with zigzag shadows across his body, but it is doubtful whether this is intended to demarcate his social space. I suspect these shadow compositions are used more as an expression of his suspect personality: his 'badness'. The issue of class is a recurrent theme in analyses of British cinema, but doesn't seem to have so much weight here. This is not to argue that these Asquith films are not indicative of British life or that class is irrelevant in a discussion of them. I am suggesting only that class is not always the overriding source for expression that it is often proposed to be in British cinema.

Often the settings in these films feature very English institutions - the Underground and the boarding house for example (although there are also fairly universal spaces such as the cinema), and the minor characters that fill them are often very English types providing comic relief amongst all the strained emotions. Ann Flemming, who attended the collegium, noted how in *Underground* people are observed in a way that shows how British documentary influenced fiction. I think this notion is critical when looking at these films and how they often combine melodramatic scenarios with bits of everyday life. An image that stayed in my mind is of the tramp walking along the street in *Underground* or the lady at the bar who has her equivalent in a landlord in Asquith's *The Lucky Number* (1932). Often these switches in tone are unusual but not incongruous. It is quite possible that this mix of humour and tragedy, romance and melodrama was an attempt to draw in the widest audience possible. This combination is found in many films of the period (Hitchcock would refine it to perfection) and perhaps is one of the things that make these films particularly 'British'. Stephen Horne suggests:

Maybe it's the British love of the amateur, but even with the best films there's sometimes a sense of slight underachievement. For instance, I seem to remember that "Underground" undercuts its fantastic chase climax with a moment of knockabout comedy. It's as if we're afraid of really "going for it". Or, more favourably, maybe it's our refusal to take things too seriously. Either way, one of the reasons I love *Cottage* so much is that its intensity seems pretty undiluted. But then, this is one film that feels more European.

All three films are unusual in their approach to character, particularly if we compare them to the classic narrative use of protagonists. For a start everyone is deeply flawed. In *Cottage* our sympathies are shifting all the time. Joe is forgiven at the end because he couldn't help himself. He says, in a heartbreakingly simple manner, as he lies dying in her arms: "You see - I couldn't live without you". The most impressive switch in sympathies is with Mae in *Shooting Stars*. She has an affair, attempts to kill her husband, and all the way through acts maliciously, yet when she walks off the stage, rejected and desolate represented by a silhouette in a shaft of light, our sympathies are confusingly drawn to her again. In this festival context we are also reliant on the pianist in our interpretation of character and mood, as Neil Brand illustrates:

*Shooting Stars* has always seemed to me a strange hybrid of drama, thriller, comedy etc. At my last performance I found myself playing it as a much darker film and began to click into the idea of adultery as seen by audiences of the time. In a sense from the start the heroine is playing with fire and ends up justifiably (to 20s audiences) getting not just burnt but destroyed. I had believed this

was a film with no 'centre of good' i.e. all the characters were somehow at fault - however I think it would have been perceived in a much more fundamentalist way at the time.

The hybrid quality of these films was also acknowledged in contemporary reviews, very often as a criticism. Genre mixing was seen as frivolous, undermining the seriousness of the content. Much of the drama in Asquith's films is undercut by humour. In *Cottage*, often the same technique is used to provide alternately comedy or impending horror, for example the use of subjective inserts. As a man rabbits on to Joe he imagines a crow. As Joe enthusiastically describes sporting events there is an insertion of documentary footage. The same technique is used for quite a different effect in the montages that appear before he cuts Harry's throat. What makes Asquith particularly inspiring is not so much his choice of visual equivalents for states of mind (which are at times clichéd) but the way they are used. The tension in the beauty parlour has literally reached breaking point with a series of looks between the three protagonists. Sally is sitting beneath Harry working on his manicure; Harry is being shaved by Joe who is standing leaning over him ready to shave; Joe sees the ring on Sally's hand as Harry caresses it. Then there is an extreme close-up of a thread being pulled, the thread snaps, water sprays up, a cannon fires, then there is a flash of bright pink. The play with time and space can extend to whole sequences. In the cinema Joe's tortured state of mind causes him to reflect on past events involving Sally. In this film within his head we see segments of flashbacks to sequences we have already seen in the film proper. These then turn sour as Joe begins to imagine forcing himself on her – something we haven't been witness to, which makes it very unsettling. Asquith also uses actions to anticipate events in an almost preternatural way. For example the liquids spilling on the floor in the beauty parlour before Harry's throat is cut, and Sally pricking her finger before she sees Joe in the scene described earlier. A more recent British film that uses similar devices is *Don't Look Now* (Nicolas Roeg, 1973). Like Roeg, and as Dupont did in *Variety*, Asquith often uses the camera subjectively: the most terrifying example being when he has the audience staring up at the razor. If Asquith can literally take the audience inside the heads of his characters he also successfully uses actors' external actions to allow the audience themselves to dream. In *Underground* dejected Nell wanders around her room. She moves a plant, pushes a mannequin, and wipes dust from a table.

The way each film is structured is memorable; the framing technique of *Underground* with the train entering and exiting the tunnel, the long flashback in *Cottage* and the films within a film in *Shooting Stars*. Asquith (in an interview in 1931) said: 'I have always written my own screenplays, and it seems to me to be an absolute necessity for a director to do so'. This was relatively unusual; many films of this period were adaptations of plays or novels. It shows in the 'modern' approach to the stories' construction, in their self-referentiality. A *Variety* reviewer observes how *Shooting Stars* starts with a clinch (a fiction within the fiction) and ends with the closing of a door - the exact opposite of the normal way a film plays. All three films have intriguing openings. I found particularly moving the opening of this film. The long crane shot from the pigeon in the beams of the studio to the actress on the set on the studio floor. Apart from being technically impressive it conveys the grandeur and mystery of the stage, in a way that seems to me comparable to Kieslowski's *Personel* (1976).

British Cinema in 1920s, it is argued, is frequently bound up with the idea of the theatre and performance. In *Shooting Stars*, the 'act' is constantly interrogated. The aforementioned tracking shot exposes the mechanics at play in the construction of film firstly by drawing attention to itself – its length, its versatility and then also by what it films. The camera guides us through the physical make-up of the film within this film: the set, the cameras, the crew, the performance of the actors. Asquith's films break down the distance between the audience and the enactment. Remembering Asquith's conversation with Chaplin, what he is interested in is what the camera can add to the conveying of emotions. The close-ups, point-of-view shots, tracking shots, framings and montage sequences in these films attempt to insert the viewer into the action.

What is clear from these films is that Asquith was someone who was interested in the creative possibilities of cinema. The oft-repeated comment by Satyajit Ray: 'I do not think the British are temperamentally equipped to make the best use of the movie camera' seems a misguided assumption. This argument has a long history. In an essay on 'The English Cinema' in *Close-Up*

(1929), Harry Alan Potamkin says that: 'The Englishman is afraid of experience. He is suspicious of emotion.' Yet watching these films at the festival (a rare chance to see all the films so closely) it becomes clear that there are many exceptions. One of the highlights of the festival was watching *Cottage on Dartmoor* with Stephen Horne's accompaniment. I remember when the film finished there was a moment of silence where the audience made a pause to take a breath, for a split second trying to take in what they had seen – it was magical. When I asked Stephen about playing to these films he said:

I think that, rather than taking a 'museum' approach and trying to recreate whatever music might have been used originally, the most important thing is to help bring the film to life for an audience - which is inevitably contemporary. This does not mean being overtly anachronistic, which would seem ironic and therefore have a distancing / alienating effect. But rather I try to get inside the film emotionally, if that makes sense.

The abundance of emotion in Asquith's films was complemented by the musicians at the festival, some of who were even Englishmen!

Contemporary reviews of these films reflect frequent demands made of British culture from its critics. Both *Close-Up* and Paul Rotha criticise *Underground* for not being a 'document' of the people and the institution of the underground. *Bioscope*, wishes that Asquith had focused more on the details of the story and 'less on angles of production.' Like many of the reviews it is cautious about the lighting techniques and 'unusual angles'. One reviewer, probably recalling the landscapes of Hepworth, goes so far as to wish 'Dartmoor might be presented more attractively.'

*Variety* published two reviews of *Shooting Stars*, one by an American and one by an Englishman. It is perhaps easy to guess which one was scathing about the film. The Englishman complains that the film is 'imitative of the Ufa "absence-of-lights" complex, that it travels [sic] the camera till the looker-on becomes dizzy, and that the story is even more ordinary than the derided by implication in the film itself.' The British critics have always been the toughest on British films. Interestingly the American reviewer remarks that if the film had been made by a continental, 'say a German', its artistry would be remarked upon in Britain. This echoes a later comment by Low, 'Had Hitchcock been German, Russian or French, had he even presented himself as a more conventionally bohemian figure, he would almost certainly have been taken more seriously.' The 'It's alright for them but not us' attitude is exemplified in Rotha's writing. He frequently enthuses about German filmmakers but is not happy about them coming to work in Britain, as if they'll 'pollute' the British style (which of course they do in an extremely positive and long lasting way). Rotha's chapter on 'The British Film' in *The Film Till Now* opens with a quote from Léon Moussinac in 1929: 'England has never produced a truly English film'. Rotha is obsessed with national identity; with what is 'German', English, 'French' etc. In his book 10 pages are devoted to British cinema, compared to 39 to German cinema. He says:

I am unable to discern a realistic, expressionistic, naturalistic, decorative, or any other phrase in the development of the British cinema. Added to which, there are no tendencies to be traced, for British films do not have tendencies, unless allusion is made to the prevalence of cabaret scenes and war themes.<sup>xxvi</sup>

Rachael Low often remarks that these 'international' films appear 'nationless'. But what is an authentically British film? In fact, what is an authentically German, Italian or French film? As Gledhill remarks in the opening of her book *Reframing British Cinema*, no study of a national cinema can assume a hermetically sealed culture. Someone at the collegium said "Eclecticism is often viewed as weakness"; does this justify elements of British cinema being skimmed over or ignored? Of course not, quite the opposite. These films are interesting because at these junctures interesting historical and aesthetic questions are raised.

I think British cinema is an absolutely valid contribution to the silent picture and that it does NOT need to be discussed within a protective framework...Luke McKernan's wake up call two years ago at Nottingham re reception "We've been sending people to the wrong place - the original texts (the films) are only half the story" is, I think, fundamental to the study of British film in particular.<sup>xxvii</sup>

Re-evaluations of British cinema have been taking place over the last 15 years, including 'rogue' elements of British cinema, for example, the Gainsborough films, reviled by critics but extremely popular with audiences. These critical re-examinations exposed British identity as far from hermetically sealed and emphasised the hybrid cultural character of the films.

Asquith's films are of their moment: modern, self-referential, often classless or about one class (emphasising their universal appeal) and clearly influenced by international cinema: both avant-garde and popular forms. As my notes from the long-ago lecture illustrated, national cinemas are often defined in relation to the model of classic narrative cinema. In the collegium, Neil Brand said that Britain turned to Europe, not America during this period. These films, he argued, needed to be seen "as part of the world" and that "British cinema is not American cinema."

After watching the films together it has become clear that there is a whole array of forces working on them. To fully appreciate what these are, demands research on the personnel, on the production organisation etc. although much of this information will be difficult to establish. Then perhaps we can begin to make suggestions as to why these films look this way at this particular era. Many of these stories have yet to be written.

Thanks to Neil Brand, Bryony Dixon and Stephen Horne

*norie taniguchi*

## **music and silent film time-travel and cinematic-experience**

The first evening of *Pordenone Silent Film Festival* opened with Buster Keaton's masterpiece, *The General*, (1927). Sitting on a red velvet seat and looking at a classically decorated stage of the historical theatre-Zancanaro, I felt excited. It was my first opportunity to experience the silent film with a live performance. My heart pounded with a great expectation. As the lights inside the theatre went down, the screen came into life. The moment when the music began to resound through the theater, I felt the vivid sensation of real orchestra sound reaching directly into my heart. Suddenly, a familiar film -*The General*- has become a totally fresh and new creation. The moving image – a visual sensation – is now perfectly combined with the orchestra music – an auditory function - in my mind.

At the very height of excitement, I thought that I was perhaps experiencing the same awe that people who saw the new invention – cinema - for the first time must have felt. I can imagine the audience reacting in amazement to Lumière's *The Arrival of a Train* (1896). Just as these spectators, I was amazed by the combination of live music and astonishing imagery. At once, I recognized the substantial role music had in silent films. During the silent period, music was more than just an auditory supplement to a film. It was *the* dialogue - It was an expression of emotions, physical movements, moods, sensations, etc. that psychologically stimulated the audience's senses. To me, this opportunity was an intensely discovered momentum to be awakened to the truth. It gave me a great chance to reconsider the significance of relationship between silent cinema and music.

### **Role of the Music in Silent Period**

In *La Musique au Cinéma*, Michel Chion describes the role of music at the beginning of the film history. When films were shown at the open-air hut, music worked well to mute out projector noise and talking people, which created a unique, separate space within a clamorous location. The music helped to divide viewers from their lives and provided them with a specific space for watching films. As time went on, the music in cinema had attracted a great deal of public attention. Instead of actors and actresses who were not in the theatre, it was the live music that enhanced the emotional expression of characters<sup>xxviii</sup>.

In *Early Cinema in Russia*, Yuri Tsivian introduces three different methods of music accompaniment: "ready made music, music specially composed for the occasion, and by improvisation" He points out that, in Russia, improvisation was common because, "ready-made musical fragments loosely attached to action."<sup>xxix</sup> Tsivian continues that the improvisation was reminiscence of the people who attended musical evening in the past. The human-to-human communication between musicians and audience was still a valuable experience for the Russian people in those days. His description suggests that the film music developed along with the historical and social traditions of each culture. To compare with other Western countries, the three distinct styles indicate the different developmental ways of the cinematic accompaniment. In his book, *Music and Silent Film*, Martin Miller Marks talks about the popular use of cue sheets in America: "cue sheets provided series of suggestions for music to be used in accompaniment"<sup>xxx</sup>. At the same time, Michel Chion points out that, because of the historical theatre tradition, cue sheets did not become widespread in Europe. Most Europeans accepted the composed music or the composition of original music rather than the

ready-made music. One can say that, unlike Europeans, the Americans preferred the regular method, and that this preference led to the establishment of Hollywood's studio system. While European countries sustained their traditional cultures, America rushed toward its destination: The Golden Age of Hollywood.

Today's cinema is a big package, a grand combination of moving picture, sound effects and perfectly designed soundtrack. Yet in the silent period, the moving image was accompanied by live music. Just like today's filmmaking process, music scores for silent cinema were written parallel with the cinematic exhibition. They precede the story line, emphasize the emotion of characters, create the atmosphere, and contribute to the rhythm and tempo of the pictures. However, there is a certain difference: the human-to-human relationship between cinema and its audience. In the silent period, accompanists had a significant role as a mediator between a machine - projector - and people. It's this *live* relationship which made silent cinema to be often more visually vivid and emotionally powerful than its modern counterparts.

### **Prepared Music for Silent Cinema**

On the opening night, *The General* was shown with well-prepared music. According to the official catalogue, Mr. Alloy, the principal of Alloy Orchestra, had written the score for *The General* for more than a decade. Because the film is so significant- it is full of sight gags, shows incredible actions, and brings a powerful kinetic quality- it was hard to find the most effective way to perform. As a result, *The General* was dramatically recreated. There, the music successfully provided the jaunty rhythms to Keaton's acrobatic action, presented the emotional effects of "melodrama" with Annabelle, and gave the dynamic kinetic power to the locomotive. Importantly, the experience of *The General* was a great opportunity to understand that a prepared music is undoubtedly a big part of silent films and its cinematic exhibition.

*The General* is constructed with a perfect symmetry; each scene in the film's first half has a counterpart in the second half. The gags that appear in the first half are faithfully restored in the second half. This symmetry succeeds in stimulating the audience to laugh repeatedly at the same spot. Throughout the film, the music effectively helped the cause and effect line of this narrative structure. In the catalogue, Alloy introduces, "There will be several sections for each theme, and a different theme for each scene. Each theme is comprised of several different melodies or rhythms."<sup>xxxii</sup> In the second half, when Johnnie and Annabelle return to the South, earlier events occur again. Simultaneously, the familiar theme music was played with the recurrent gags. When the music with same tempo and rhythm was played again, the audience remembered the series of complicated stunts and gags shown in the first half. Though it is a symmetrical action, the stunts and gags involving Annabelle are dangerously exaggerated in the second half. Adding drama to the moving image, the fortissimo sounds successively built-up the tension, and the kinetic energy of locomotive was enhanced. Finally, the music led the audiences toward the climax scene on the bridge.

The film is also composed of a dual-plot: one is an adventurous story told around a hilarious train chase; the other is a melodramatic love story involving Annabelle. Two plots interact with each other while being perfectly combined with well-conceived prepared music. In the melodramatic part, in a scene beside the locomotive, when a moving wheel causes Johnnie's body to jump up and down, Keaton explicates the element of melancholy and amusement while retaining visual simplicity. The music, moody at first to express Johnnie's depressed feeling, livens up to support the gag. On the other hand, in the battle scene, the music extensively played for sound effects. Alloy comments, "One of the challenges was getting all the gunshots."<sup>xxxiii</sup> During the tremendous battle sequence, the gun sound was remarkably effective. The incentive blare for cannon firing and gun fighting greatly improved the tension of the scene.

Alloy refers, "There are lots of sound effects that we perform live. It's always a challenge to get the timing just right on these, and there is no substitute for extensive rehearsal."<sup>xxxiii</sup> The performance was a complete success, the result of carefully prepared music and lots of rehearsal. The moving images and prepared music were perfectly combined to create a *new* work. Apparently, what we call "silent cinema" is not really silent - it contains an obvious sound part. The prepared music was a significant part of the film during the silent period.

## **Improvised Music and Silent Cinema**

In *Early Cinema in Russia*, Tsivian introduces an interesting formulation of Russian musician, Khudyakov, who pointed out that the most important part of the improvisation is the human-to-human communication between audiences and an accompanist. He insisted that this type of communication creates a powerful effect on people, and it never happens by using mechanical music<sup>xxxiv</sup>. It is engaging to read and consider the most important role of the improvised music in the silent period. During the festival, I had numerous experiences to see films with live musical accompaniment. Through these opportunities, I came to understand that improvisation is a way of communication. It appears that, during the silent period, audiences and accompanists were more firmly and frequently in contact with each other.

John Sweeney, one of the greatest pianists and composer who has been playing for films for 17 years, could answer my questions. Just as Khudyakov's concept, Sweeney strongly believes that the most important thing for accompanist is the communication with the audience. He respects the first impression of films, tries to have a common idea with spectators, and produces the most effective music in each situation. Sweeney frequently changes the tempo and texture of music following not only moving pictures, but also the audience's reaction in search for the most suitable harmony with the audience. Carsten-Stephan Graf v. Bothmer, a young pianist invited to the festival, also describes his belief that an accompanist is a mediator between audience and cinema. He repeatedly says that when the three-functions - audiences, accompanists and films - are united, the theatre becomes the true cinematic space. There, the music directly communicates with both people and moving images, and produces the space and time completely detached from our daily life. Although almost a century has passed by, today's accompanists still believe in the importance of human-to-human relationship with their audience.

Sweeney explains that he tries to create an atmosphere inside the audiences' mind. In order to maintain fresh approach, he usually avoids preparing for the film that he is to accompany. When Sweeney played *Kino-Glaz* (1924), it was his first time to see the film. In "Cooperatives and markets," the director, Dziga Vertov rewinds the meat processing sequence: from the cowshed to the butcher. For the scene in which people disembowel and slaughter a cow, Sweeney adopted a minor key to gradually cover the theatre with a heavy, blood-smelling mood. Yet, in the next scene, "The city and the countryside," the music turned brighter to give a lighthearted rhythm to the picture. On the screen, under the bright sunshine, a pastoral scene was seen spread along. Consequently, any oppressive feeling the audience may have had was released at once. The film was in black and white yet the music gave it brilliant natural colors and fresh smell of green grass. Here, Sweeney presented his cinematic space in front of us. He followed the transforming mood of the picture, quickly shifted the tone of music to best accommodate the moving image, and produced the vivid colors with his melody.

Sweeney and Bothmer both believe that human-to-human communication produces a space that requires music, audience and moving images to be united. When we watch silent films, there is neither an actor-actress nor great landscape. They don't actually share the same time and space with the audiences. They are just projected images on the screen. They have no sound or hand-coloring. Under these circumstances, an accompanist's job is to suggest a way people can communicate with the projected images. The music conveys the voice of characters, the air, landscape and its colors. By listening to the accompanying live music, the audience's senses are stimulated.

When these three functions are working in a perfect harmony, the result is the true cinematic space. During the silent period, motion pictures were recognized as mechanical devices. A projector automatically and insensitively beamed pictures on a screen. Most people were still unfamiliar with film production. For them, it was very difficult to understand how to communicate with films. At the time, music accompanists were the only people who directly communicated with the audience. They evoke audience's emotion and senses, which are reflected upon a screen. Here, the improvised music acts as an intermediary between cinematic projectors and people.

## **Music and Dziga Vertov**

In *Encyclopedia of Music for Pictures*, Erno Rapée describes the origin of music. "Action which differs from motion only in being purposeful found its first expression with our ancestors uttering guttural sounds, which sounds, in the course of thousands of years, developed into speech. --In the rising and falling of the human voice we find the real origin of music<sup>xxxv</sup>." Rapée's description is now a great hint in considering the relationship between music and Dziga Vertov's films. A great deal of Vertov's film gave me such hard and metallic impression. However, he primarily represented the close images of human taken from their daily life. Every time when I see the Vertov's productions, the music presents the human texture and neutralized my impressions. The encounter of live music and Dziga Vertov reminds me of the time when people were unfamiliar with the mechanical projectors.

Rapée suggests that music has developed by trying to imitate human's physical movement, which essentially means that music and human body has an important connection. We understand that the music as it directly reaches our minds because the idea of "music" originally came from the "movement" of ourselves. On the other hand, camera is a totally mechanical creation. By pressing a little button, it automatically records the slices of our daily life and prints them out as pictures. Cinema provides the kinetic energy into these still pictures. The still images are given the mobility to move from place-to-place and from time-to-time simultaneously. Here, we could find the common idea of "movement" in music and cinema. Music is a human-oriented creation, and cinema is a mechanical creation. Yet when these two factors are combined, a surprising harmony is created, because, they are both based on the common idea - movement.

Vertov's *Kino-Glaz/Kino-Eye* clearly indicates his dual style. "Kino" suggests his modern aspect as a Russian Futurist, and "Glaz/Eye" presents his social status as a member of Moscow Cinema Committee. *Kino-Glaz*, Vertov radically demonstrates how cinema technique produces the new form of the humanism. Vertov experimentally shot the moving pictures, freely edited newsreel films, and produced a completely new style of documentary cinema. In a sequence of scenes in which a girl, Shura, collects fund, Vertov alternately shows the shots of close-up of Shura's face, children beside the window, adult male in the tavern, and extreme close-up of the bellows of an accordion. Here, his dual approach can be seen. Vertov closely follows the people in town, disclosing their personal life. Inserted in between the picture of human activities is the shot of an accordion. The extreme close-up of the bellow, its geometric shape and mechanical movement suggests that it is an experiment created by a mechanical device. Dziga Vertov's films, therefore, contain both physical and mechanical functions.

In *Man with A Movie Camera* (1929), Vertov symbolizes a prominent cinematic representation of people's lives. His visual description of a man running at full speed around the town shows extremely rapid montage of the latest model of train, streetcar, and automobile demonstrates the possibility of cinematic illustration. Its result is a picture that symbolizes the mechanical power rather than the human activity. Here, we realize the necessity of music. The music conveys human texture and comfortable melody, and reconciles with the din and bustle of a town. Because Vertov's pictures so prominently feature the power of machinery, the music becomes indispensable. The improvised music frequently alters the mood of a picture and neutralizes its metallic impression, making it more human.

One could say that the relationship between music and Vertov's film symbolizes the relationship between people and cinematic projector during the silent period. Here, the improvised music also acts as an intermediary between mechanical projectors and people.

While I was in Pordenone, I often wondered what it was like in the silent period: how cinema affected people and their lives, how people actually felt, and enjoyed films. The festival offered numerous opportunities to travel to the past. I realized that in the days of silent cinema, music - especially the improvised music - had an extremely important role to play. I understand that there was a certain communication between people, cinema and accompanists that created a cinematic space totally different from today's.

I would like to thank John Sweeney and Carsten-Stephan Graf v. Bothmer for their precious comments, the Pordenone Silent Film Festival for presenting me with a great educational opportunity. It was truly an unforgettable and meaningful experience for me.

*tan pin pin*

## **contemporary mediums resurrecting ancient shadows**

I was chatting at the Giornate to an archivist I met from the Hong Kong Film Archive, and I asked him who accompanied the silents they periodically screen in that part of the world. He said, "In Hong Kong, we only have one silent film pianist, and he plays the same tunes for every film. It's a bit boring, but he's our only one". That said as much about the isolation of silent film accompanists, as about the need for good silent film accompanists who can shape our viewing experience: they indirectly help preserve and save these films. Perhaps that lone ranger musician would be glad to know of a gathering of kindred spirits at the Giornate every year.

The Giornate in 2004 brought about half of the known silent film musicians together. They had a "same time next year" pleasure at seeing each other, I found them together at the café beside the Zancanaro imbibing good spirits both before and after each performance. On the afternoon I was there with them, I eavesdropped upon a discussion between two musicians who were talking about a performance where they would be playing together. One was quizzing the other who had seen it before for information about the film. The exchange went something like this

"What kind of film is it?"

"It's a love story"

"Does it have a happy ending?"

"Yes, happy ending"

"I have the lovers' theme written out, take a look"

"Hmm....nice melody"

The most salient points established (happy film about love, with love tune established), they left to play a duet. At least these musicians have some information about the film. Often, the musician plays cold, knowing less than the audience. He has to come up with a love theme on the spot and must modulate and expand the themes for the duration of the film. He must summon up his musical vocabulary to tap into the audiences' collective musical memory. Like a simultaneous interpreter, this requires sensitivity to the curves of the storyline, a sizeable musical repertoire and a good sense of when to apply it for maximum benefit of the film. The musician is processing three strains of information in real time.

They had come from as far as Germany, Chicago, even New Zealand, with backgrounds equally diverse. One started out as an actor, another is a film historian, and another a filmmaker. If there was a single strand that drew them together, I sensed it was a deep appreciation of the silents and their role as a contemporary medium that resurrects forgotten masterpieces. As Gunter Buchwald said of his work "We influence how to see". Using a spiritual metaphor is appropriate. More than once I saw the pianist in the pit making a sign of the cross before laying his hands on the key board, just before flicker started as if to say, "Please help me use all my gifts to help them appreciate this masterpiece". They take their roles seriously.

What I had always found surprising in my research on silent film music practices was that silents always had accompaniment. They were never silent. I was also shocked that it was industry practice for directors or distributors to leave the choice of accompaniment to the player(s)

in the cinema. As a director myself, I was surprised that the director/producer surrendered control of such a vital component of the viewing experience. If they did, it was possibly with reservation. There were cases of directors, like Vertov, who used specially composed scores to accompany films but this was an exception.

Some screenings afforded rehearsals for the accompanists, others had to play on sight, interpreting the screen goings-on cold. Musicians evolved different ways of coping with having to produce so much music so often. There were theme books with tunes that they could call upon so if you needed a tune for "stormy night", or a "Persian bazaar" (Albert Kettelby?), you could seek it out in the index. Working to tight deadlines, they evolved a bag of tricks and used clichés freely to enhance the film-going experience. Needless to say, few recordings of these performances remain.

For a contemporary musician interested in accompanying the silents, with such a chequered and not particularly well-documented lineage, the experience is liberating yet frustrating. Liberating because it means that more often than not, he has free rein of what and how he wanted to perform. Yet frustrating because there is not so much as a primer to teach one how to play for the silents. Reverting to the contemporaneous theme books is not necessarily inspiring. Besides, what was practiced in the past need not necessarily still be relevant, even though the use of original period scores or instruments is interesting insofar as it shed light on what the early audiences were exposed to. It still leaves a blank slate as to how the musician should play if the same film is to be enjoyed by audiences today.

The musicians in the 2004 edition of the Giornate took up the challenge presented by the lack of clear direction from history. We saw a wide range of musical practices beyond the traditional piano set-up. There was a specially commissioned score for *The Cat and the Canary* (Paul Leni, 1927) featuring the Theremin. The performance of *Home Sweet Home* employed an ensemble with two voices. There were also attempts at playing on a specially prepared piano, with nails and sticks inserted in the strings. A pianist sang alongside what was on the screen during a Vertov film. Some of these attempts were more successful than others.

Of the films I attended, the most memorable was *A Cottage on Dartmoor* (1929, Anthony Asquith) accompanied by Stephen Horne. There was a collective buzz that night born of the sharing a triumphal moment together. It was a beautiful film elevated by skilful and emotive accompaniment. What marked the performance was interestingly enough, silence. *Cottage* is a tale of a jealous man stalking his ex-lover who is now happily married and living at a cottage in Dartmoor. At two moments silence was used to great effect, one, when the two protagonists were on a date at the cinema to watch a talkie. What we saw were expectant audiences waiting for the film. When it started we saw close-ups of the delighted faces, hearing voices from the screen for the first time. Horne stopped playing. This sleight of hand immediately highlighted the fact that we were two different audiences watching the same film 70 years apart. Our shock at "hearing" silence was matched the audience's shock at hearing sound for the first time. The sensation was of being suspended in time. Horne called attention to his role in the viewing experience by this paradoxical move. It was enlightening. The other moment was a simple domestic scene: the jealous lover, a barber, shaves a client who happens to be the woman's husband. The moment is fraught, will he slit his nemesis' throat? He very deliberately sharpens the razor. As he takes the razor up to his neck, there is suddenly silence. When I later asked Horne about how that inspired decision not to play came to be, he said that it was suggested to him by a colleague. He had a few rehearsals before he got the rhythm right. When he did play it that way, he found it very effective.

The experience with *Cottage on Dartmoor* made me appreciate the live performance aspect of the screenings. How is my appreciation of film heightened by the fact that the music is played before me? Would my experience be different if the music was pre-recorded and played alongside the film? In the case of *Cottage*, my experience of the film was heightened because, there was a person who was watching the film and reacting to it in the same way as I. His presence helped me along,

corroborated my experience of the film. This is important, especially with material that is far removed from the normally familiar. His guidance was helpful and vital.

In the footsteps of the masters, four younger musicians were chosen to attend master classes in musical accompaniment at the Giornate. These four are multi-talented, they hail from Vienna, Germany, Italy and USA. Two of them play more than one instrument. All have a gift of improvisation and are already experienced in playing for silents. The School of Music and Image was held every morning throughout the Giornate from 11-12.30. It was conducted by Neil Brand with input from other musicians who made guest appearances. I attended the classes as an observer because I was curious if musical accompaniment could really be taught. I found myself learning a lot about filmmaking and film watching. Brand showed fragments of films and had the students play to it, cold as they would in an actual performance. The examples were carefully chosen to illustrate tricky situations that a silent film pianist may encounter. He taught them how to roll with the punches and gave practical tips on how to deal with difficult scenarios. The main point he made was, the need to be constantly alert and to react to a scene quickly. Is he the villain (He wears white shoes!)? Does the sequence look like it will be a long one? Familiarity with the codes and filmic idioms come with experience he said. The important thing is, once that split second impression is registered, the musician can not dither, but has to commit to it and to play out that impression.

One of the topics covered was how to play a long drawn-out scene without running out of musical ideas, especially a scene whose length cannot be anticipated. Brand showed a film where a storm is in full force, in the course of which a girl is about to be raped and a train is about to crash. The scene went on at length without reaching a climax. Neil Brand suggested that the musicians modulate to a lower key, rather than play in the same key all the time. This gives the audience a sense of change and at the same time provides the pianist with room to manoeuvre higher if and when the climax comes.

In an earlier scene where the villain first appears (we know he is the villain because he is too suave, too well dressed for this little town, as well as the white shoes), Brand suggested rather than announce his appearance in a marked way, to take the soft approach. All the scene needed was a slight turn of the cog to suggest that something was out of joint. Metering out information a little at a time allows the musician to save his musical reserves for the climax. It also heightens the excitement for the audience, because less is more. Restraint, as in the case of *A Cottage on Dartmoor*, is key.

In another session, Brand showed Keaton's *Three Ages* (Buster Keaton, 1923), a comedy which sees Keaton vying for a girl against Wallace Beery a much stronger man. The same story line is repeated in three different epochs, Keaton is by turns a club-bearing cave-man, a Roman soldier and a dandy in the contemporary jazz-age 20's. Brand suggested that a musician would quickly run out of tricks to sustain a feature if he played it comically through out. He suggested that the musician play the tussle for the girl as a *drama*. Playing a comedy *straight* can often makes it funnier. He added that Keaton takes sad music better than Chaplin because Keaton had the appropriate melancholy face which permits music to be used ironically. The students discussed the principle of "Mickey-Mousing" - where every gag, whimper or door slam is mirrored in the music, as in cartoons - and arrived at the conclusion that it is not necessary that they reflect every bang in their music if it detracts from the overall direction of their playing.

Brand touched on the awkward situations where the musician is unsure where the action is heading. To illustrate this point, he showed Siodmak and Ulmer's silent masterpiece, *People on Sunday* (1930). The film is about four young people and their relationships to one other, which shifts quietly over the course of a picnic outing. There are moments in the film where nothing seems to happen - the four just chatting amicably on a hillside. Brand suggests that in this situation, it would be all right for the musician not to know and to play it "unresolved" because it reflected the confusion on

the screen. The point was that the musician had to commit to a tone (even if it was an "unresolved" one) and see it through or the audience would be confused even further

Brand touched on the uncomfortable situation where the pianist plays to a film that turns out to be a dud. He says that while he "plays each film as a masterpiece", giving his best until it is proven otherwise, if it is a dud, he helps out where he can and when he can no longer help, treads water until the end of the film.

One aspect of musicianship that was not covered in much detail was the choice of music for a film. Donald Susan showed a clip of a western and threw it open to the students, asking them what kind of music they would pick for that scene. One played a *Bonanza* theme, another, folk fiddle-like music and yet another suggested Aaron Copland. Is one choice better than the other? By the end of the master class, I realised that any of those suggestions might be a starting point, depending on personal preference. The craft lay in whether the musician could develop and extrapolate from the theme he had chosen, colouring it with his interpretation of the scene to serve the dramatic needs of the film. This takes practice, great skill and sensitivity.

At the end of the master classes, the invaluable lessons learnt by the four students were those that could be taught. There was a component related to the musicians' response to the material before him which was a function of their personalities, their curiosities, their perceptive and interpretative powers. This gift could bloom under tutelage but it certainly could not be taught, only to be had, and given – and gave they all did. Tama Karena from New Zealand said, that when he plays to a film, he relates his whole self to it. The sounds he produces are his unmediated response to the film: he cannot divorce his personality from his playing. Brand adds that his own playing is a purely emotive response to the film, part of his effort to "play it like a masterpiece". Philip Carli after a rigorous *Three Songs of Lenin* (Dziga Vertov, 1935), proclaimed that while he did not share Vertov's politics, he played it so that the audience would rush out to become Socialists, as Vertov would have wanted. All three acknowledge their roles as mediums for the films, conjuring the messages to light for an audience far removed from the circumstances of their making.

*thunnis van oort*

## **silent film audiences**

It was a curious sensation to be surrounded by fans of the silent film, confessed Diana Serra Cary, formerly famous as child-star Baby Peggy, who appeared as a special guest of Le Giornate del Cinema Muto 2004. Hollywood, when marketing the sound film, had been very successful in portraying the old silent film as something of the past, a primitive phase in the development towards the perfect projected illusion. And in going about in their daily business, Peggy and most of her contemporaries forgot the antiquated silent film, at least as a living cultural entity. Many years later one can imagine how she was struck by the peculiar resurrection of the silent film audience she encountered in Pordenone. Who were those people with this peculiar interest in ancient movies? They hardly resembled the crowds she used to please on the screen all those years ago.

In a way, I could relate to her amazement. Not, of course, that I was part of the historical audiences that watched silent pictures. But I tried often to picture them. Through the flimsy scattered pieces of evidence that are left I am trying to reimagine the long-gone crowds that filled the cinemas. I visited Pordenone on that mission. Not driven by the qualities of the films themselves, but because I was interested in the spectators, for whom the films were meant originally. And basically that is not us. Perhaps apart from a self-appointed visionary such as Dziga Vertov, most filmmakers represented at the 2004 edition of the festival produced films for audiences then and there, and could hardly have dreamt of the prolonged lifespan their products would enjoy in these picturesque surroundings.

The differences between the historical film audiences of the years before the Second World War and the select gathering encountered in Pordenone 2004 are hard to exaggerate. First of all, there is the almost endless variety of past spectators compared to the relatively well defined group of festival visitors. For the largest part they consist of film archivists and scholars, although indeed a clear line between the two is hard to draw. About the academic background of Pordenone visitors I cannot make any solid statements, but literary studies, art history, philosophy and history seem to be the most important disciplines of origin that still mark the different approaches and methodologies in the field. This goes especially for the older generation of film scholars that was responsible for fencing off a new discipline of film or media studies, and more recently even film archiving. The younger generations were often educated in this loosely defined field. And of course the festival itself is one of the products of this process. It started out in the 80s with only a handful of pioneers. Paolo Cherchi Usai recalled that during the first edition of Le Giornate there was only one cassette tape that accompanied all the films. So in the end they all knew the music by heart, probably to the point of revulsion.

One small but interesting category of the Pordenone audience were the local dignitaries, who only showed up at special occasions: the opening and closing events. During the reception after the opening film *The General* it was quite surreal to encounter real live uniforms, only minutes after Buster Keaton had finally earned his own stripes. At first I wondered whether it was part of the programme. It was part of a different programme though, also important: maintaining relations with the town elites. It struck me because the same strategies were applied by local cinema exhibitors in the past (and still are). When for instance in October 1925 a new and spectacular movie theatre

opened in the Dutch provincial town of Venlo – and without doubt it was basically the same in similar towns the world around –, all the big shots congratulated the celebrating entrepreneur. Town councillors, chief of police, personalities from local industry and business, and also some prominent figures from the film trade. But during regular business days one would not encounter them in the auditorium, and the same goes for our Italian 'generals': I only saw them during the opening ritual.

Both the historical and the current audiences had in common the social component of film viewing. For very different reasons, the movie itself was not necessarily the prime reason for watching it. Going to the silent cinema with friends could be a pastime during which the film was hardly the centre of attention. And visiting the darkened auditorium with a lover might completely obliterate the action on the screen. As far as I could observe, amorous experiences were not what the present-day Pordenone moviegoers were after, at least not in the auditorium. But no one would deny the strong social dimension of the festival that exists mainly outside of the screenings. The informal contacts made and maintained during the Giornate are an important part of the social make-up of the field. Deals are made and jobs are distributed here. And for some visitors these inescapable labours are paramount, accidentally enlivened by the occasional flick. For sure, to most Pordenonians the film screenings themselves do appear to be the central issue. Even more so than for the original audiences, who went to the cinema for fun, not for work.

Work? For a lot of festival visitors this is not just a job thing, it is a passion. For some people early films are what their lives are made of. What on earth else would make them fly all the way to provincial Italy? Apart from the reasons mentioned above: networking and meeting kindred spirits (and also besides the delicious coffee and foodstuffs) it must be a genuine excitement or even an obsession for silent film that draws this special crowd. But could that compare to the enthusiasm of film fans of those bygone days? A teenager infatuated with Mary Pickford is fundamentally different from a modern day spectator watching for example *The Poor Little Rich Girl* (1917). I can imagine this film was meant to be an ordinary man's glimpse into the world of the very wealthy. Pickford plays the unhappy child in a very rich family, longing for contact with the few 'ordinary' people she gets to meet in her golden cage, such as a gang of neighbourhood kids and a street organ player. But like many films from that age, it now offers a glimpse into a world that has long passed, and as such can be exciting for different reasons than the makers imagined.

Clearly, different audiences have different objectives. For instance take the film scholars. The elder generation of academic film scholars largely originated from a different field. Would colleagues in established disciplines have accepted film as an object of serious study? They might have looked down on it - at least a few decades ago they did. When carving out a new discipline what one needs is legitimization. This occurred in various manners. One is by distinguishing the high artistic value of the medium. Film is art! Conceived by genius! The film industry itself discovered the sheer value of this claim very early on, and it still works – rightly so. I would not want to argue film possesses artistic qualities, of course it does. But since Bourdieu we know that this also has social consequences: defining something as art adds prestige to those doing the defining. In a different way, the film archivists assign their own bit of sacral quality to the cinema. Nitrate as a revered substance. The silent film as a magical dream of the past.

This might be a caricature of reality. Besides, it was definitely not all high art that was shown in Pordenone. Two grand serial films were screened (although during lunch time). The closing film *The cat and the canary* (1927) did not appear to have artistic pretensions. This impression is supported by the text in the catalogue, which is an important factor in shaping the expectations of the audience. There were more examples of run-of-the-mill products that were not intended to be part of any canon, then or now. They were screened – I guess – simply because they still existed, through restoration. To me, admittedly not a connoisseur, among those were some really interesting films like *Phil-for-short* (1919), *Boireau, bonhomme de pain d'épice* (1913) or *The Flapper* (1920). They offered an insight into the sorts of unassuming products regular film audiences would watch on a daily or weekly basis.

Other programmes were unmistakably part of canonisation projects. Which need not be a bad thing at all, as an inevitable process, necessary to give form and meaning to an otherwise endless corpus of surviving films. This is a complicated process in which a festival such as Pordenone plays a significant role. In selecting the programme, but also in creating expectations in the catalogue descriptions. Starting with Dziga Vertov, he was without any doubt already part of the existing film historical canon. This position was reinforced by screening almost his entire (silent) oeuvre, exactly by treating it as an oeuvre to begin with. But it was placed into a wider context. Some films were not exactly masterpieces. A few other films by his contemporaries were screened, although I think this comparative part of the programme might have been extended somewhat more, to get an idea in which mental climate Vertov worked. But that would probably have overloaded the already vast programme. So on the one hand Vertov was presented as a highly gifted artist, creating an instant army of vertovians, who wouldn't miss a single reel of their champion's footage. And on the other hand his position was nuanced, although in my opinion only slightly. I cannot get away from the impression that a genuinely critical discussion did not take place in the sense that no one questioned Vertov's place in the canon. But perhaps that would be silly to expect or even desire in the first place.

Yuri Tsivian described a 'totally stupid critic', contemporary with Vertov, who interpreted his *The Eleventh Year* (1928) the wrong way (2004 catalogue page 60). I wonder if one could really blame the majority of Russians in 1928, or even specialists such as film journalists, for misinterpreting the avant-garde editing style of Vertov? But Tsivian even mockingly suggests the poor critic 'deserves to be killed'! Instead I think it would be more significant to analyse how some critics and other viewers (mis?)interpreted Vertov's films. This could lead to a better understanding of the actual receptions of his work, compared to the interpretations Vertov aimed for. Why would we need to be interested in the ideas Vertov attempted to spread, if nobody understood them correctly or was interested in them at all?

In the book *Lines of Resistance: Dziga Vertov and the Twenties* which was presented during the festival, Tsivian collected many different voices on Vertov and his work by contemporaries, thus offering an opportunity to study the varying responses to the films. This time no one appears to receive posthumous capital punishment by the editor: Tsivian allows the texts to speak for themselves. The aim of the book is to rehistoricize Vertov's work in the context of the discussions in his time. The wide spectrum of opinions adds to the impression that Vertov's work, although propagated as proletarian, was primarily appreciated by a cultural and intellectual elite. This paradox applied to many avant-garde artists of that period.

An illustration of this point is the so-called 'unskilled worker' Biurobina who ventilated his dismay in party newspaper *Pravda* over the fact that no Kino-Pravda newsreels were to be found in the Moscow theatres (p. 80). Only Harry Piel and decadent female film stars, who 'left nothing but wind in the viewer's head.' This attempt to propagandise Vertov's praise of 'our great teacher and leader Vladimir Ilich Lenin', did not hide the fact that most Muscovites apparently preferred unpretentious amusement films, just like anywhere else in the world. Did the ordinary Russian enjoy or understand Vertov's work? To answer that question qualitative sources most probably are lacking, but we might get a general idea from the distribution figures of his films. Where did they show? How were they distributed? Did they yield profits? Unfortunately Tsivian's introduction does not supply any of these earthly facts, which would have furthered his decent cause: embedding Vertov's films in their historical background.

Another canonisation project was even more explicit. The British silent film of the 1920s had unjustly been excluded from the canon, 'a great black hole' as Bryony Dixon called it in the catalogue (page 79). The programme presented at the festival was aimed at countering the immense condescension by Truffaut who supposedly had branded British cinema a 'contradictio in terminis'. By the way, it goes without saying that the Mitchell & Kenyon collection contributes to

filling another gap in British – and international – film history by calling attention to enchanting examples of early local film production. In these films the line between viewer and viewee became blurred, spectators visited the theatre to look at themselves and their fellow citizens.

The Asquith films were an interesting contribution to the noble objective of rewriting British film history. In two of his films screened, Asquith depicted the cinema audience, which inspires a further juxtaposition of the historical and the present day audience. First, in *Shooting stars* (1928), the male protagonist (Brian Aherne) plays a British film star. Fleeing the reality of his unhappy marriage to an adulterous movie diva, he decides to visit a cinema theatre. In the (silent) melodrama he walks into, the hero is just in time to knock down the villain and save the damsel. 'I wish life was like the movies,' our movie-hero/spectator sighs. Aherne is depicted completely absorbed in the story on screen: Asquith shows the concentrated expression on the faces of the audience. Not only in this auditorium, but also the crowds standing at the outdoor film set, are all explicitly shown laughing at the slapstick performances, totally involved in the spectacle. Is that how Asquith expected his audience to behave: concentrated and involved (and in accordance with the classical model of the spectator)?

The second instance where the cinema audience performed in an Asquith picture (*A Cottage on Dartmoor*, 1929/30), was one of the highlights of the festival. Not only because of the magnificent scene shortly described below and the musical performance, but also because the composed Pordenone audience seemed to forget itself, and responded to the direct address Asquith made to his viewers, bridging the decades in between. The scene: a couple visits the talkies in the 'Elite Theatre'. A jealous third party is seated a few rows behind and watches the twosome closely. Asquith also introduces other characters in the theatre audience. There are the two young boys, who are very actively responding to the film, laughing and clapping. A deaf lady repeatedly asks what is going on on the screen: her friend loudly answers through the horn she holds to her ear.

Then, when the shorts are over, the main programme starts: the sound film. The musicians put down their instruments, start eating, drinking and smoking, even playing cards. This scene originally had a sound track, which is now lost. The Pordenone pianist, Stephen Horne, inventively stopped playing completely, joining his colleagues on the screen. The silence awarded the remainder of the scene a heightened intensity, and also gave more prominence to the audiences' responses, in both the fictional and the real auditorium. Asquith subsequently showed the changed attitude of the spectators towards the sound film, compared to its silent predecessor. The enthusiastically clapping and shouting two boys suddenly restrained themselves. Their loudness appeared to be a disturbance to others. The same goes for the deaf lady. In the talkies obviously it was more important to actually hear the soundtrack in order to follow the story, where a mute film was able to narrate with strictly visual methods. But the lady's friend is embarrassed to recount the whole film to her deaf companion. The talkie is disciplining its audience, changing its behaviour. And finally also absorbing it. The boys, the couple, all members of the audience become enthralled by the picture. Except for one man, who falls asleep, snoring. In the silence of the Zancanaro Theatre, where the pianist still let the scene speak for itself, one spectator made a loud snoring sound. This tiny act of rebellion, the laughter that followed it, and the spontaneous applause for the musician's resourcefulness, briefly broke the silence of the serious, analytical Pordenone spectators and revealed the moviegoers underneath.

I would like to thank Jonah Horwitz for his helpful comments on an earlier version.



**partecipants and collegians**

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<sup>viii</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire 1875-1914*, (Abacus, UK: 1987, reprint 2001) 3.

<sup>ix</sup> Rachael Low, *The History of British Film, Vol. IV: The History of British Film 1918-1929* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 308, 309.

<sup>x</sup> Quoted in Roy Armes, *A Critical History of the British Cinema* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1978) n. pag.

<sup>xi</sup> David Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), ch 2.

<sup>xii</sup> Paul Rotha, *The Film Till Now: A Survey of World Cinema*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London: Spring Books, 1967), p. 313-14.

<sup>xiii</sup> Kenneth Macpherson, "As Is," (Vol. I no. 1, July 1927), *Close Up 1927-33: Cinema and Modernism*, eds. James Donald, Anne Friedberg, and Laura Marcus (London: Cassell, 1998), p. 37.

<sup>xiv</sup> Jamie Sexton, "The Film Society and the Creation of an Alternative Film Culture in Britain in the 1920s," *Young and Innocent?: The Cinema in Britain 1896-1930*, ed. Andrew Higson (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002), p. 293-94.

<sup>xv</sup> Harry Alan Potamkin, "The English Cinema," *Close Up*, Vol. IV no. 3 (March 1929), p. 27, 26, 23.

<sup>xvi</sup> Rotha, *The Film Till Now*, p. 320.

<sup>xvii</sup> Potamkin, "The English Cinema," p. 22.

<sup>xviii</sup> *Ibid*, p. 26.

<sup>xix</sup> Potamkin, "Phases of Cinema Unity," *Close Up*, Vol. IV no. 5 (May 1929), p. 27-28. Unfortunately, Potamkin does not cite the source of this quote, and I was unable to locate it.

<sup>xx</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>xxi</sup> Sergei Eisenstein, "The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram," *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, ed. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1947), p. 17.

<sup>xxii</sup> Léon Moussinac, "On Cinegraphic Rhythm," in *French Film Theory and Criticism 1907-1939, Volume I: 1907-1929*, ed. Richard Abel (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 280.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Christine Gledhill's "Between Melodrama and Realism: Anthony Asquith's *Underground* and King Vidor's *The Crowd*," argues that *Underground* negotiates the threat of working-class masculinity, represented by Bert, to women living and working independent in the city by privileging the romance of the upwardly-mobile, more classically beautiful couple Bill and Nell, who marry by the film's final scene. Published in *Classical Hollywood Cinema: The Paradigm Wars*, ed. Jane Gaines (Durham, N.C; London: Duke University Press, 1992), p. 129-67.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs, *Theatre to Cinema: Stage Pictorialism and the Early Feature Film* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 23.

<sup>xxv</sup> R. J. Minney, 'Puffin' Asquith (London: Leslie Frewin, 1973), p44.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Paul Rotha, *The Film Till Now: A Survey of World Cinema* (London: Vision Press Ltd, 1951), p318.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Interview with Neil Brand

<sup>xxviii</sup> Chion, Michel. *La Musique au Cinéma* Translated by Ito, Seiko. And Nihongi, Kaori. Misuzushobo, 2002. p27

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- <sup>xxxix</sup> Tsivian, Yuri. Early Cinema in Russia and its Cultural Reception Translated by Bodger, Alan. Edited by Taylor, Richard. The University of Chicago and London, 1994. P87
- <sup>xxx</sup> Martin, Miller Marks. Music and Silent Film Oxford University Press, 1997.p6
- <sup>xxxi</sup> 23<sup>rd</sup> Pordenone Silent Film Festival Catalogue p16
- <sup>xxxii</sup> Catalogue p17
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> Catalogue p17
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> Tsivian, p90
- <sup>xxxv</sup> Rapée, Erno. Encyclopedia of Music for Pictures Arno Press & New York Times, 1970 p7