

## Three Songs about Lenin

(Tri pesni o Lenine, Soviet Union 1934; D.: Dziga Vertov)

**(Picture 2)** At the end of his life Dziga Vertov envied the Russian poet Vladimir Maiakovskii, who had committed suicide in 1930: “Now all his books are fighting for him - a rich legacy. Good that he wasn’t a director.”

Vertov himself (1896 to 1954) was a director, a film director. He ranks as one of the greatest avant-gardists of Soviet film, the inventor of, as he himself put it, an “absolute language of the cinema”. But his entire work, he wrote in his diary, was mutilated, wrongly copied, mangled, or simply thrown away, in short "obliterated in its entirety".

**(Picture 3)** His films were in no way as completely destroyed as Vertov lamented - his most famous one “Man with a Movie Camera” (*Chelovek s kinoapparatom*) from 1929 is today regarded as a milestone in documentary film making, and probably represents the peak of his film theory and practical development. It is quasi Vertov’s self-portrayal and a catalogue of his film finesse. The cinematic experiment portrays a cameraman who - as described by the Berlin newspaper *Weltbühne* in 1929 - “has left the cage of the studio to go out into life”. For this Vertov worked with many industry tricks that have since then become routine in film-making: Time lapse and slow motion, footage played backwards, optical foreshortening and surprising montages. He positioned the camera between railway sleepers under moving trains, and on moving platforms.

Movement was the agenda of the director, which the librarian’s son, born Denis Arkadevich Kaufman in Bialystok, announced with his professional name: “Dziga” is derived from the Ukrainian word for a spinning top and at the same time establishes a connection with “cygan” (gypsy); “Vertov” comes from “vertet”, which means to turn and circle.

**(Picture 4)** Constant movement of the film camera, in accordance with a “legitimate fantasy of movement”, was decreed in a manifesto written by Vertov in 1923. In the same document he demanded the “disarmament of theatrical cinematography” and the banishment of music, literature and theatre from film, quarrelling with the film romantics and calling for them to “speed up their death”. Vertov produced counter examples to catchy entertainment cinema with his “Man with a Movie Camera” and then in 1930 his sound movie “Enthusiasm:

Symphony of the Donbass” (*Simfonija Donbassa*), which reflected the development of an industrial centre and is classified as the first documentary sound film of the Soviet Union.

**(Picture 5)** No exertions were too great for the pioneer in order to achieve his ideal of the “fact film”. During the civil war he rode around between the battlefields for months, in trains with built-in film laboratories. Later he looked for his motives in areas infected with epidemics, on streets, in factories and in slums, where (quote) “laughing and crying, dying and paying taxes are not subject to the instructions of a film director”. In Moscow he himself lived for a long time with strangers in an overfilled small apartment, and in 1936 noted in his diary: “The fortunate Edison - he was deaf.”

**(Picture 6)** However Vertov found especially burdensome the fact that, toward the end of the twenties in the newly formed cultural scene under Stalin, there was nobody to sufficiently appreciate him. The artist was, despite proletarian attitude, denounced as a “formalist”, permanently impeded by bureaucratic harassment and isolated. “Who”, he asked dramatically, “gives the leper a hand?”

In this way the Soviet cultural bureaucracy, although officially protecting the deviant, refused him honours and workplaces, allocated him sometimes unsuitable film material and enticed his employees away. Any of his films that were completed despite this were played, if at all, in small cinemas; but for the most part the material rotted uncopied in the archives.

**(Picture 7)** The inadequate conservation of Vertov’s legacy corresponded with the general assessment of the film revolutionaries in the Soviet Union until well into the sixties. Only for the celebration of the 100th birthday of Lenin in 1970, with its huge demand for pertinent works of art, was the sound film “Three Songs About Lenin” once again played in Moscow, the film which Vertov had composed from documentary footage of the development of the country and from the funeral of the revolutionary leader, accompanied by recordings of his voice, folk poetry and worker interviews from records.

**(Picture 8)** These “Three Songs About Lenin”, which we are about to hear and see, is considered to be Dziga Vertov’s last great Avant-garde film. The work, which Vertov produced on a government commission for the 10th anniversary of Lenin’s 1923 death, is divided into three parts; the three Soviet “folk songs” inspired by motives of Uzbek folklore form the core of the action. Vertov’s earlier documentary material about the revolutionary and founder of the state is expanded over the course of the film into a rhythmic montage poem in

that sequences from history and present, newsreel images and recordings of Lenin, improvised interviews and settings from European and Asian parts of the country are combined into a powerful metaphor for the development of the Soviet Union. From “Lenin lamps” (the light bulb) in the smallest hut of an Uzbek aul (village) to the gigantic Moskva-Volga canal: Spanning continents, the various nations of the Soviet Union praise the leader of the world proletariat. Formally this masterpiece thus certainly represents the sum of Vertov’s creative ideas.

**(Picture 9)** As in the Soviet discourse of modernization, it was Islam, and especially the figure of the Muslim woman, that played a major symbolic role. As staunch proponents of the European Enlightenment ideals of progress, freedom, and equality, Soviet Marxists championed the cause of the ‘liberation of Muslim women.’

The education of women, particularly Muslim women, was seen as a requirement for the well-being of the nation and for reaching the desired level of civilization. This linking of modernization to women, it should be remembered, was not unique to the Soviet Union of the 1920s. At the same time, ‘modern reformers’ in the neighboring country of Turkey was promoting and enforcing similar ideas and policies. Other than devotion to a linear conception of history, the underpinning assumption, that the nationalist modernizers of Turkey and the Soviets shared was the Orientalist divide between East/West and primitive/civilized. It was in this discursive field – its genealogy dating back to the nineteenth century – that Muslim women’s clothing, particularly the veil, appeared as the most visible and outward indicator of the Orient’s allegiance to the past.

**(Picture 10)** It was ‘the songs of the Soviet East,’ according to the opening captions of “Three Songs about Lenin”, that ‘served as the basis’ for Vertov’s celebrated film:

. . . songs of a wom[a]n who  
has cast off her veil,  
of electricity that brings light  
to the villages,  
of water that makes the desert recede,  
of the illiterate  
who have become literate,

and of all this  
and LENIN being one.

**(Picture 11)** The first episode of the film revolves around the theme of Muslim women and is exemplary of the Soviet attitude to the issue. Identified as “The First Song: My Face was in a dark Prison”, it opens with a series of shots, each displaying a veiled woman (from Central Asia) whose body and head is covered by her clothes. Reminiscent of the decaying ‘tombs of the East’, there are also shots of a half-ruined mosque. The words ‘I led a blind life’ are combined with a shot of a bare-foot and visibly ill woman, trembling as she walks. With the Islamic call to prayer on the soundtrack, a group of turbaned men bow down in prostration, and then a cut to the statement: ‘In ignorance and darkness, I was a slave without chains.’ After these words, we see more glimpses of the ‘backwardness of the East’: a woman carrying a heavy load on her head, a shot of a (‘folk’) religious talisman, more praying, and more veiled women. There is another diseased body too, a blind vagabond dervish with a cane.

These images of the past, symbolic or literal - that is if they consist of found footage shot in earlier periods - are contrasted with those of the present. The ‘arrival of modernity’ is dramatic and triumphant as the sound of a trumpet reveals: ‘A ray of truth began to shine – the dawn of Lenin’s truth.’ In place of oppression and ignorance there is going to be liberation and enlightenment. Images of the ‘new Soviet woman’ – we see a medium shot of a young woman studying next to a window and wearing only a scarf – are intercut with those of the ‘new youth’: a rather large group of Komsomol adolescents marching forward next to a riverbank. Almost everything about these ‘new youths’ is differentiated symmetrically from the representation of the past and its remnants: in place of diseased bodies, there are healthy-looking young bodies; uniforms replace the ragtag Oriental costumes – that ‘overdress’ the Oriental body; instead of prostration there is an orderly march behind flags; and last but not least, their proud forward movement is recorded by a traveling camera that moves horizontally and parallel to the marchers, implying a sense of freedom and empowerment.

**(Picture 12)** Meanwhile, the young woman, as though in response to the marchers’ call, leaves her house and starts to walk through the back-alleys and streets of a city that is waking up. To the upbeat rhythm of percussion and flute, images of her journeying outside her home are intercut with frontal shots of veiled women casting off their veils. We learn her destination when a sign (in Russian) on a building she enters identifies the site as ‘THE

TURKICWOMEN'S CLUB.' Interior shots of her ascending the stairs are combined with what seems to be glances at the activities that take place at the Women's Club. The pedagogical services offered there apparently include the provision of reading materials (in rooms adorned with Lenin's portraits), literacy classes, music lessons, and health care. We observe a half-naked little girl whose height is being measured by a member of the staff.

**(Picture 13)** The hope of overcoming the disabilities and pains that illness can inflict on the human body, gave these simulated healthy bodies of the Soviet dream-world, in which cinema plays a significant role, an utopian impetus. Defeat of disease, among the other brutal effects of nature on the corporeal body (such as hunger, cold and death), was yet another promise of modernity with its drive for scientific and technological advancement. But this utopian impulse, too, became incorporated into the Soviet 'phantasmagoria of production'; in other words, by discursively linking disease to the body that resides in 'pre-modernity' - the body of the peasant and the Oriental - this utopian potential became a legitimizing force to control and regulate. As a result, in its articulation of the East, the dominant discourse in post-revolutionary Russia came increasingly to resemble that of the late Imperial era. Those who lived on the Oriental periphery of the new Soviet state, whose cultures and ways of life were deemed as 'vestiges of the past,' came under immense pressure to 'speed up' in order to become contemporaneous with their age. Therefore, the unhealthy bodies and veiled women of 'the East' came to represent the very antithesis of modernity, first in the cosmological narrative of Soviet historiography, and later in the simulated world of the Soviet cinema, particularly since the late 1920s. In a truly modernist fashion, in line with other fictionalized dichotomies of the time – Nature/Culture, East/West, Primitive/Civilized, etc. – the diseased body also had to have its defining opposite. The youthful marching band in "Three Songs about Lenin" was perhaps just a precursor to this 'new mass.'

**(Picture 14)** The discursive opposite of the 'pre-modern' body was above all the ideal healthy body of athletes and dancers, whose valorization reached a new height with the emergence of the genre of the Soviet musical in the 1930s (e.g., Grigorii Alexandrov's *The Circus*, 1936). In these monumental and carefully choreographed films, the music was used 'to provide the organizing rhythms, [to which] the masses danced onto the screen surface as an animated, formal design.' Always composed of ideal, athletic figures, the mass-body evoked the pleasures of the collectivity.

So consequently, the second song, “We loved him as we loved our steppes...” addressed the death of Lenin in 1924 and the commitment of the party to implement his legacy in the future. In the third song, “In a big city of stone”, this forward-looking utopian thought is finally taken up. Communism appears to already be realised in the centre (in Moscow) and from there starts its triumphal progress into the Soviet periphery and over the whole world.

**(Picture 15)** The message is clear: Even ten years after his death Lenin is still omnipresent, especially in the unyielding belief in progress of the young Soviet power - revolution is infectious, moving and present. Using newsreel footage and newly recorded sequences Dziga Vertov masterfully assembled a gripping montage hymn to Lenin - at a time in which Stalin (who is hardly seen in the film) was already the undisputed leader. Thus the film was dropped after only eight days. For the censors, the glorification of Lenin with the conspicuous absence of Stalin was considered inadequate. Also to be seen in the film were old comrades and companions of Lenin who Stalin probably already had in his sights for liquidation at the time.

Indeed, in 1938, a year after the so-called “great terror” and the associated purges in the party a likewise “cleansed” version of the film was presented, in which the aforementioned comrades are missing and in which Stalin is presented to the public as the true heir and perfecter of Leninist ideas.

**(Picture 16)** Today we are watching the restored original version from 1970, which, as well as the original Russian inter titles in the credits also works with some text in the English language. In fact the work of Dziga Vertov was rediscovered at the end of the sixties by aesthetic as well as politically radical artists in the West. Pioneering in this, amongst others, was the French film-maker Jean-Luc Godard, who at the time made films in a collective which was founded by Vertov himself - this bore the programmatic title of “La Groupe Dziga Vertov” – “Dziga Vertov Group”.

**(Picture 17)** Looking back, from the ‘privileged’ position of a contemporary viewer from the East, one might find these images as ultimately contradictory. A question that keeps coming back: What of the other consequences of the ‘arrival’ of machines for the peoples of the Soviet periphery? Of that, we see close to nothing. Concealed behind the unity of the cinema masses of Soviet films are the inequities, if not atrocities, to which those who were deemed ‘vestiges of the past’ were subjected. In 1921, it should be remembered, before the Soviet

filmic airplanes came into being, the Uzbek city of Bukhara experienced aerial bombardments. The discrepancies between the real and the dream world of the universe of the Soviet documentary filmmaking point to the phantasmagoric traits of this cinema. The Soviet phantasmagoria of production, increasingly resembling its Western consumerist counterpart, built a multitude of things – massive dams, factories, theatres and mass bodies. The ‘smaller’ peoples of the East, denied contemporaneity by the progressive Soviet historiography, were to ‘race like the wind’ in order to be admitted into the dream world of this modernity. From the mid-1920s, the Soviet cinema, as a medium of producing meaning, increasingly reproduced this model of linear historiography. If ‘we’ are to recall the utopian potential of these images, we need do so in the hope of telling those narratives of the past and future that have room for radical difference.