

Enthusiasm

DZIGA VERTOV

1931

Dziga Vertov's *Enthusiasm* is a vital document from a pressure point in Soviet history – a moment at which technological and political transformations coincided with radical results. It represents arguably the apotheosis of one of the most influential filmmaking careers of all time, as well as a valedictory triumph for the Soviet avant-garde, already on borrowed time when the film was released to official confusion and derision in 1931. That it is also a hymn to Vertov's beloved Donbas makes it all the more pertinent for contemporary audiences, for whom the region is now indelibly linked with images of devastation that are, at once, at odds and uncannily in tune with Vertov's vision of promethean industrial creation.

It is one of film history's great coincidences that sound film came to the Soviet Union at almost exactly the same time as Stalinism was on the ascent, a cinematic revolution in unison with a political one. As the state launched a program of rapid industrialisation and collectivisation of agriculture, and tightened centralised control over all aspects of cultural production, cinema itself was reckoning with the end of the silent era, which in the USSR had produced the mighty "montage school" of avant-garde luminaries: Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and Vertov himself. The *Eleventh Year*, Vertov's silent tribute to the Donbas, was released in 1928 – the same year that the First Five-Year Plan was launched. Three years later, Vertov would produce his celebration of the Plan in action in the Donbas, only a few months after Nikolai Ekk's *Road to Life*, widely considered the first Soviet sound film.

For many of the montage masters, the arrival of sound posed a serious problem. In a 1928 article, Eisenstein and Pudovkin warned that the great leaps forward made by Soviet montage film – in particular its radical experimentations in editing – risked being undone by synchronised sound, which would make everything too easy for the audience, too obvious. Vertov, however, had no such qualms. His own theory of cinema, forged in his years producing newsreels during the Russian Civil War, was premised on revelation. For Vertov, the miracle of cinema was its ability to reveal, through a combination of camerawork and editing, more than the feeble human eye could master: "A revolution in seeing, and therefore in man's reception of the world in general." Rather

than an impediment, sound was simply another element to be incorporated into this revolution in perception. As he put it in 1929, he would proceed "from the montage of visible facts which are noted down on film, to the montage of visible-audible facts which are transmissible by radio [...] To the filming unawares of human thoughts..." Like images, sounds could be cut together in radical new ways in order to transform our understanding of the world around us.

In *Enthusiasm*, Vertov put these ideas into practice. The opening scenes, in which a young woman in headphones tunes into a radio broadcast, allegorises the film's approach to this new technology. The woman experiences the sounds of the film simultaneously, as it were – a Shostakovich march, church bells, ambient birdsong – before a radio announcer cuts through with the command: "Listen!" Both she and us, the audience, are compelled to engage with the material onscreen. That material is remarkable: an almost abstract reverie of factories and mines, workers and machines, the old world (represented by the church ransacked in the opening sequence) torn up and remade. The soundtrack eschews synchronicity and deprioritises the human voice in favour of an ensemble of industrial clangs and crashes recorded on location.

It was precisely this commitment to the internal logic of the material that landed Vertov in trouble. The new culture of Stalinism increasingly demanded clarity and mass appeal; the age of the avant-garde was passing. *Enthusiasm* was dismissed by critics as cacophonous: "extraordinarily overloaded with sounds of a monotonous character," one wrote. "It would seem that a human being is simply physiologically incapable of apprehending such a quantity of sounds." Vertov responded with typical bullishness: "I refuse to become like those novelists who hymn the Donbas while turning away from it, shutting their delicate noses, their delicate eyes and ears. I lived the sounds of the Donbas and wrote the film with the voices of machines, the voices of shock-workers, and the sounds of radio-telegraph messages..." Within a few years, films like *Enthusiasm* were gone from the Soviet screen. It stands today as a snapshot of that brief moment when sound and image were allowed to exist in a bold new kind of unison, and when the Donbas itself still dreamt of a prosperous, progressive future.