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## **KINO-EYE AND THE PROJECTIVIST BREATH-SPACE: DZIGA VERTOV'S AND CHARLES OLSON'S FOUNDING AFFINITIES**

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Writing about Dziga Vertov, Waclaw Osadnik (2003) mentions a plan for a film that was never made: "Vertov was fascinated by Mayakovskii's syllabic meter and, among his papers in the Moscow archive, there is a 'deconstructed' poem of Mayakovskii and the sketch for a movie based on it." (Osadnik 2003: 157). We might recall in this connection Osip Mandelstam's praise for Mayakovsky's "refined raeshnik," which according to the English edition of Mandelstam's essays, "is found primarily in folklore and in imitations of folklore and colloquial speech, and especially in the kind of rhymed prose shouted by street vendors and hawkers in pre-revolutionary Russia" (Mandelstam 1979: 628). The form of this street speech, or refrain, is variable, not fixed: "the raeshnik is made up of lines of unequal length (no set number of syllables or stresses are required by the line) and is organized phonetically, primarily by odd-rhymes which are often paired" (Ibid.).

The opening lines of Charles Olson's epic, *The Maximus Poems*, might be heard as an adumbration of Mayakovsky's "raeshnyi stikh":

Off shore, by islands hidden in the blood  
jewels & miracles, I, Maximus  
a metal hot from boiling water, tell you  
what is a lance, who obeys the figures of  
the present dance (Olson 1984: 5).

If we hear these lines as a distant echo of those cried by peddlers hawking their wares in the city streets of either country a century ago, then from the

beginning when reading *The Maximus Poems* the redirection towards public space and the spoken word declared in the manifesto, "Projective Verse," can be observed taking place. Following the chronicle of that year, 1950, as read through the Olson-Boldereff correspondence, a draft of the manifesto accompanies a letter from Olson to Frances Boldereff on 11 February, and the first of *The Maximus Poems* is sent to her on 17 May of the same year (Olson and Boldereff 1999: 163, 335).

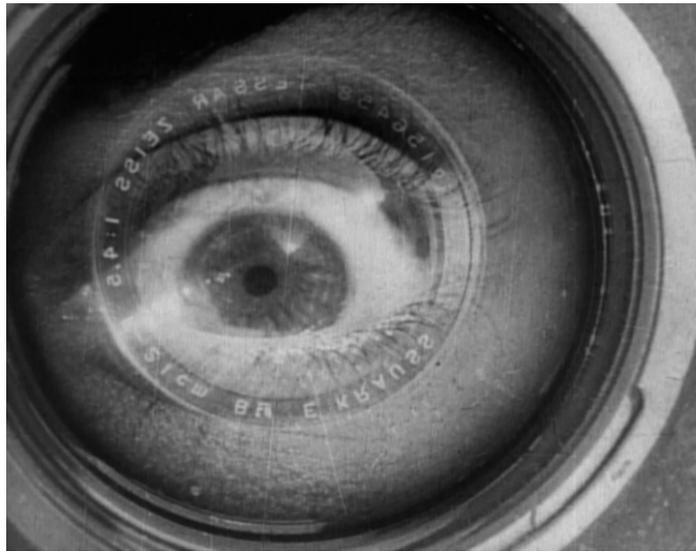
Vertov writes about meeting Mayakovsky by accident in the Hotel Europa only weeks before the poet's suicide. Misunderstanding Mayakovsky's remark that "we should talk some time," the filmmaker waits until midnight for the poet who does not appear (Vertov 1984: 181). In the imaginary space Foucault once called the Fantasia of the Library, where visitations may occur across generations and many forms of borders may be crossed, I would like to substitute Charles Olson for Vladimir Mayakovsky as a visitor to Dziga Vertov, even if the syllable is a tenuous basis on which to effect such an introduction. It is, after all, the slightest feature of resemblance between the iconic Russian poet of revolution and the American poet writing in the years immediately following World War II. For Olson, in "Projective Verse," the only revolution that mattered was "the revolution of the ear, 1910, the trochee's heave" (Olson 1997: 239). In fact, in his only essay on a Russian writer, "Dostoevsky and *The Possessed*," there is a diametric difference stated from the social and political upheaval to which Vertov committed his work: "What he [Dostoevsky] sensed and what we now know is that the modern revolutionary state denies the dignity and the value of individual human personality. It only rises upon the destruction of the individual." (Ibid.: 129). Yet even in Walter Benjamin's cursory remarks about Vertov's 1926 "The Soviet Sixth of the Earth," where flows of disparate images "in fractions of a second" appear spliced among "fleeting individual excerpts" from archival footage, there is a glimpse of an affinity of formal elements in Vertov's film theory and Olson's poetics (Benjamin: 13).

Benjamin takes note of Vertov's "attempts to make film straight from life, without any decorative or acting apparatus" (Ibid.). It is exactly against the rhetorical devices of the "decorative" that Olson's "Projective Verse" takes a stand as part of a "stance toward reality" which, however different the socio-political and ideological reality of 1920s Russia from 1950s America, in the historically-motivated imaginations, theoretical conjectures, and actual practices of filmmaker and poet a set of common preoccupations and a shared trajectory across the object status of the document can be discerned. Vertov's film language lends another dimension to Olson's use of the term, "projective," and Olson's "objectism" can contribute to an understanding of Vertov's 1929

*Man with a Movie Camera*, which may even serve to complicate the recent return to this film as a precursor to the immaterial image-space of digital media in Lev Manovich's (2001) *The Language of New Media*.

Language, then, as another means of signifying than by means of the language spoken in a country and by a people, appears in Osadnik's essay as well as Manovich's book, in the introduction to which are wrapped quotations from his theorization of contemporary digital practices around 54 stills from *Man with a Movie Camera* (Manovich 2001: xv–xxxvi). Vertov's polemical statements about his filmmaking and especially his films in the 1920s and 1930s are viewed by Osadnik as fundamental to a critique of film as theater, and by Manovich as fundamental to understanding how perception is being transformed before our eyes by the increasingly computerized environments with which we communicate and through which our social experience is mediated.

It may serve as a reminder of the global reach of visual culture that this image from *Man with a Movie Camera* is familiar to many who have never seen the entire film.



This shot, duplicated four times in the prologue to Manovich's *The Language of New Media*, also receives attention from Osadnik, whose comments arrive near some of the same concerns addressed by Olson in "Projective Verse," with the exception that for the poet breath and the body are given organic priority

in the restless pursuit of energy and perception, the kinesis of constructing objects in the phenomenal world. According to Osadnik:

The famous image of a human eye reflected in and looking out of the camera indicated that historic-technological development was also an extension of the range and capacities of our senses. The senses pass through matter and know themselves to do so in such a way that it appears as the consciousness of matter itself. This constituted Vertov's dialectics of seeing and at the same time served as the antidote to mythic consciousness and mythic vision which visually discovers the relations of production embedded in all social and historical formations (Osadnik: 151).

Referring to the same shot, Jonathan Beller has called it "[t]he quintessential image of the Vertovian manifesto ... a dialectical image that contains a vision of the conjunction of humanity and the machine in a circulatory system that produces consciousness precisely by passing through materiality" (Beller 1999: 164)<sup>1</sup>. A passage from *The Maximus Poems* provides a notable parallel: "polis is / eyes" (Olson 1984: 30).

These two lines, which begin "Letter 6" in the first book of *The Maximus Poems*, themselves offer a 'quintessential' example of Olson's projectivist poetic. With the burst of air when the lips separate at the end of the initial consonant, the /p/ in English being one of the bilabial plosives taking an uninterrupted air flow in making this sound, opening here on the "ah" of the closed /ɒ/ followed by the softness of the lateral approximant preventing the repetition that follows from being strict or pure, as though hesitant, uncertain, in doubt, the closed /ɪ/ and vibrating terminal soft /z/ that receives yet a third and final sounding after the second line's open /aɪ/ which culminates this moment of outgoing and ingoing, like the respiratory movement of breathing out and in.

It is important to Olson's use of the word *polis* that it is not equivalent to city, carrying as it does from Greek the combined designation city and state. We are given two useful references in the pages preceding the four-syllable utterance:

As the people of the earth are now, Gloucester  
is heterogeneous, and so can know polis  
not as localism, not that mu-sick (the trick  
of corporations, newspapers, slick magazines, movie houses  
the ships, even the wharves, absentee-owned (Olson 1984: 14).

I speak to any of you, not to you all, to no group, not to you as  
citizens / as my Tyrian might have. Polis now  
is a few, is a coherence not even yet new (the island of this city  
is a mainland now of who? Who can say who are  
citizens? (Ibid.: 15).

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<sup>1</sup> *Project Muse*, <<http://muse.jhu.edu/demo/boundary/v026/26.3beller.html>> (2 June 2005).

Vertov's project proposal for *Man with a Movie Camera* describes a city "symphony" close to Olson's polis, foregrounding the participatory role of the citizen as figure, and sharing the sense of acceleration and multiplicity – how to represent the heterogeneity of the population in the modern city and the variability of the visual and acoustic rhythms to be found there. Film and poem diverge in the difference between Vertov's (1920s) emancipatory hope for Russia and Olson's (1950s) sense of the end of social contract's possibility in America. The regime that by the late 1930s would prevent Vertov from making films returns in Olson as a form of societal failure accompanying economic concentration and monopoly. For the poet his relation to his city approaches the condition of anomie, while for the filmmaker the city is a synthesis of purposeful and meaningful constructive gestures and actions. In his project description Vertov writes:

Streets and streetcars intersect. And buildings and buses. Legs and smiling faces. Hands and mouths. Shoulders and eyes.

Steering wheels and tires turn. Carousels and organgrinders' hands. Seamstresses' hands and a lottery wheel. The hands of women winding skeins and cyclists' shoes.

Men and women meet. Birth and death. Divorce and marriage. Slaps and handshakes. Spies and poets. Judges and defendants. .Agitators and their audience. Peasants and workers. Worker-students and foreign delegates.

A whirlpool of contacts, blows, embraces, games, accidents, athletics, dances, taxes, sights, thefts, incoming and outgoing papers set off against all sorts of seething human labor.

How is the ordinary, naked eye to make sense of this visual chaos of fleeting life? (Vertov: 285)

Olson, in "Projective Verse," writes that the poem "is a matter, finally, of OBJECTS," which he considers to be "participants in the kinetic of the poem just as solidly as we are accustomed to take what we call the objects of reality [...]" (Olson 1997: 243). This emphasis on the ontological and linguistic materiality of the poem leads him to challenge conceptions of the self central to an expression-based aesthetic: "Objectism is getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, as the 'subject' and his soul, that peculiar presumption by which western man has interposed himself between what he is as a creature of nature [...]" (Ibid.: 247).

Vertov's version of "the lyrical interference of the individual ego" is expressed as early as "WE: Variant of a Manifesto" (1922) where European dramas and American action films are equally criticized: "We consider the psychological Russo-German film-drama – weighed down with apparitions and childhood memories – an absurdity" (Vertov: 5). The constructivist critique of empathy and identification from which Brecht's later theorization of the alienation-effect will largely derive are applied by Vertov in opposition to scenario and dramatization, and rehearsed (simulated) action is called "a copy of

a copy” (Ibid.: 6). Vertov demands for film a more immediate contact with reality, and he considers the techniques and devices of illusionism as obstacles to seeing. Similar to the demands for poetry made by Olson, Vertov writes of the need for the study of speed, visual rhythm, and the movement of things:

Kinchestvo is the art of organizing the necessary movements of objects in space as a rhythmical artistic whole, in harmony with the properties of the material and internal rhythm of each object.

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.

The organization of movement is the organization of its elements, or its intervals, into phrases.

In each phrase there is a rise, a high point, and a falling off (expressed in varying degrees) of movement. A composition is made of phrases, just as a phrase is made of intervals of movement (Ibid.: 8–9).

“WE are in search of the film scale” declares Vertov, just as Olson, at several points in his manifesto, refers to the use to which the projectivist poetic might be put, in search of scale: “some sort of drama, say, or of epic,” (Olson 1997: 239) the conception and composition of which would involve “the problem of larger content and of larger forms” (Ibid.: 248). The Elizabethans are remembered as the period when poetry in English carried the widest range of material. But what has changed is the attention to the units, elements, particles, the “minims” of speech for Olson, and the “geometrical extract” of frame and montage for Vertov, who in his 1922 manifesto suggestively refers to the “film epic or fragment,” an association especially important for understanding the method of *The Maximus Poems*, where the epic is the montage-like projection of its fragments:

My shore, my sound, my earth  
afterwards, in between, and since  
my place

This page from *The Maximus Poems* offers to our eyes a spatial field where the margins have either entirely disappeared, or have migrated towards the center, so that anywhere is everywhere: the page itself has been destabilized, and we must rotate book or body to read the text, made conscious of the gap between viewing and reading. Those parts of ‘speech’ in English so much a part of its drive towards order, prepositions, subordinating and coordinating conjunctions, etc., intersect on one line, or plane, with a four part nominal catalogue and statement of possession and belonging on another plane. We find ourselves in all the middle of the making of a sentence, the syntax-producing process exposed in all its provisionality, and the distance between the two orders of the sentence should suggest the violence to language required by discursive forms.

On such a page of poetry, if we apply metrical criteria, something must appear to be awry. When we apply the cinematic concept of the splice, however, our understanding of the aesthetic at work on this page can change. Peter Gidal (1989) defines the function of the type of splice to be found in such films as *Man with a Movie Camera*, “as dialecticized material cut-off so that the montage could be foregrounded” (Gidal 1989: 107). If we think of the two lines intersecting on Olson’s page as two strips of film, then Gidal’s further definition appears directly applicable:

Here the splice, projected, is not simply another abstracted image, but rather a process, the holding together or not of two disparate, or continuous, strips of film. The splice then becomes simultaneously the interruptive and the facilitator of a form of continuity. The splice’s contradictory function, image, and process, interruptive and its opposite, is produced in films which do not codify its suppression (Ibid.: 108–109).

The suppression of the splice results in the appearance of seamlessness in film narratives: the edited display of rehearsed stagings which, combined in a representation privileging the construction of plot and character identification, results in illusionistic surfaces from which all traces of production have been erased. We become habituated to certain forms of signifying and their certainties, prevented from seeing signs of the struggle among signs for meaning. But how far does such habituation to cinematic and narrative conventions extend? Manovich, like Gidal, is referring to formal properties when he mentions that “in the case of classic Hollywood style, a viewer may expect that a new scene will begin with an establishing shot or that a particular lighting convention such as high key or low key will be used throughout the film” (Manovich: 242). That’s entertainment, and we recognize this as an obvious problem for questions about style. However, a further and more critical dimension appears in the genre of the ‘nostalgia film,’ the products of which embody the contradiction of being about the past and at the same time ahistorical, “images, simulacra, and pastiches of the

past,” as Frederic Jameson has remarked, criticizing the slick production of “fashion-plate images that entertain no determinable ideological relationship to other moments of time: they are not the outcome of anything, nor are they the antecedents of our present; they are simply images.”<sup>2</sup>

Both Franco Moretti (2001) and Slavoj Žižek (2001) have commented on the contemporary trend of Holocaust movies, represented by Roberto Benigni’s *Life is Beautiful* and Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List*. While Moretti sardonically remarks that for the mass audience of the “hybrid” blockbuster Spielberg is the messiah and Benigni his prophet (Moretti: 98), Žižek draws the disturbing conclusion that, whether in the pretense of “psychological depth” in *Schindler’s List*, exposing “all that is false in Spielberg,” or the “ridicule” to which *Life is Beautiful* resorts, “[b]oth comedy and tragedy rely on the gap between the impossible Thing and an object, part of our reality, elevated to the dignity of a Thing, functioning as its stand-in—in other words, both comedy and tragedy rely on the structure of sublimation” (Žižek 2001: 69–71, 81).

Suspended between dignity or banality, heroism or vulgarity, pathos or irony, there is a threshold where the oppositions pass into each other and “we enter the domain that is somehow outside – or rather, beneath – the very elementary opposition between the dignified hierarchical structure of authority and its carnivalesque transgression” (Ibid.: 86). The questions that close Žižek’s glance at the problem of Hollywood’s consolatory images and “the abuse of the suffering it uses (stages)” return us to the post-war period when Olson begins writing:

Is not such an abuse the very core of the satisfactory effect of tragedy? And is it not true that this aesthetic abuse is no longer feasible, reaches its limit, in the case of the Holocaust: if we endeavor to represent it in an aesthetic way, abuse becomes manifest, and thus renders the aesthetic effect inoperative? Perhaps this is one way of understanding Adorno’s much-quoted ‘no poetry after Auschwitz?’ (Ibid.: 87).

One way of understanding Olson’s 1950 “Projective Verse” is to view its emphasis on formal elements as situated within a vital and urgent recognition of the post-war impasse for American poetics when an unexamined modernist tradition threatened to implode, encouraging academic complacency and aesthetic adjustments to the triumphalism of an ascending empire.

The last point of correspondence between Vertov and Olson involves one of the main sites of struggle among multiple and contradictory meanings in the

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<sup>2</sup> Frederic Jameson and Anders Stephanson, “Regarding Postmodernism – A Conversation with Frederic Jameson,” quoted in Patrice Petro, “After Shock/Between Boredom and History” in *Fugitive Images*, ed. Patrice Petro (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 269.

visual and language arts: interpretations of history. This paper begins, for example, on the jarring note of an association between 1920s Russia and 1950s America, identifying a set of formal elements shared by a filmmaker and a poet working at different times, in different countries and in different cultural contexts. Both Vertov and Olson make available an approach to the past that relies on the primacy of source materials, but can the use of such materials, integral to the documentary mode, occupy the same status as formal device, such as spliced referents and syllabic frames? Montage, equally, can be seen as a formal principle belonging to both *Man with a Movie Camera* and *The Maximus Poems*. However, what formal property can be assigned to the archive?

Europe just then was being drained away swept by the pox so sassafras  
 was what Raleigh Gosnold Pring only they found fish not cure  
 for fish so thick the waters you could put no prow'd  
 go through mines John Smith called these are her silver  
 streamers Spanish north Latitudes to avoid Sable course  
 W 2 minutes north fetch Cape an or Isle Shoals make \$1000 per  
 man per 7 months than in 20 hiring out for wages Indians  
 occasionally bloody had trick of cutting off feet and hands poor  
 John Tilly John Oldham and 69 lusty men Bradford called Weston's it wasn't  
 pie Wm Bradford John Winthrop were Medici to top the tough  
 West the Puritan coast was was fur and fish frontier cow-towns  
 GLOUCESTER Queen of the fishtowns Monhegan Damariscove & 1622:  
 Cap an all after her Weston Thompson Pilgrimes grabbing  
 & Richard BUSHROD beating em to the westerly side of sd Harbour  
 George derby agent and JOHN WHITE old minister John poking out the  
 green stuff or whatever money looked like don't mistake there wasn't  
 money Wow sd Pilgrimes ONE HALF MILLION BUCKS in 5 years from  
 FURS at the same time FISH pulling all of Spain's bullion out of (Olson 1984: 113).

This is one of many passages in *The Maximus Poems* where information from the database of American history, and in particular the colonial history in and around Gloucester, Massachusetts, resurfaces in the work of excavation. In these passages narrative voice coincides with buried voices of letters, journals and legal documents, and sometimes entire logs and other such surviving entries are lifted out of the archive and into the expanding montage of the larger poem. A lexical density emerges in this multivocal space where the past struggles for legibility, as though an activation of the image of the archive in Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera*:

In one of the key shots, repeated a few times throughout the film, we see an editing room with a number of shelves used to keep and organize the shot material. The shelves are marked 'machines,' 'club,' 'the movement of a city,' 'physical exercise,' 'an illusionist' and so on. This is the database of

the recorded material. The editor, Vertov's wife, Elizaveta Svilova, is shown working with this database – retrieving some reels, returning used reels, adding new ones” (Manovich: 239–240).

Where Moretti can speak only scornfully of the mass audience for such films as *Life is Beautiful* and *Schindler's List* – “these stories are designed for a new human species of savvy children and silly grown-ups” (Moretti: 98) – addressing the global reach of such genre pictures masquerading as history, he makes a striking comparison between the folktales of earlier centuries and “these concatenations of striking events and hyperbolic actions” (Ibid.: 94). Moretti mentions not only the subordination of language to image, but also the very domination of American film in the 1920s which had made it one of the targets of Vertov's “WE: Variant of a Manifesto”:

Behind this diffusion is at work one of the constants of cultural geography: stories travel well ... because they are largely independent of language. Within a narrative text, style and plot constitute discrete layers, and the latter can usually be translated (literally: carried across) independently from the former. ... This relative autonomy of the story-line explains the ease with which action films dispense with words, replacing them with sheer noise ... while this brisk dismissal of language, in turn, facilitates their international diffusion. Significantly enough, in the 1920s American films were already enjoying a worldwide hegemony: what brought it to a halt was the invention of sound, which elevated language into a powerful barrier, supporting the quick takeoff of the various national film industries. The abrogation of language in action films is a powerful factor in turning the tide around. (Ibid.).

Significant for the conclusion to our association of Dziga Vertov with Charles Olson is the fact that Moretti puts video games in the same category as action films, whereas one of the notable aspects of Manovich's *The Language of New Media* is that a connection is made there between Vertov's film praxis and the interactivity not only of video games and flight simulators, but the graphic user interface (GUI) and its use of spatial logic, in addition to the various applications involved in web browsing. The structure of perception is changing and we are still searching for terms by which to understand this new audio-visual language. Any assertion, then, of the need for re-emerging forms of historical memory grounded solely in speech and residual traces of writing surviving the passage of centuries must not only ignore the challenge to knowledge posed by digital technology, but after Manovich's study, it would hardly be tenable to claim for Vertov a position counter to this process.

Perhaps the most appropriate closure for the moment to these questions resides in the juxtaposition of stars in the night sky. The space separating the two images, one on the screen and one on the page, exists in the difference between marketing and art, ephemerality and permanence, light-trace and print-impression, screen and page. First, there is Manovich's description of a new form of cultural production, the volatility of signs exemplified by “the historical moment”

represented by the immaterial image of stars in the night sky saved to a small and infinitely duplicable file by a young programmer at Netscape. “This animation would appear in the upper right corner of Netscape Navigator, and become the most widely seen moving image sequence ever – until the next release of the software” (Manovich: 7). Compared to the ephemerality of such an event, and in the light of Manovich’s call for the need for its theorization, how do we read the five lines from *The Maximus Poems* following the inscribed date at the bottom of the facing page, September 29<sup>th</sup> 1965, poem and date aspiring equally to be a solid and durable marker for the ontology of the material object forged by its maker’s consciousness of time and form:

North,  
in the ice, the Bulgar  
and his 3 sons. Forever fastened,  
as Northern Lights, in one place NNW, Novoye  
Sibersky Slovo (Olson 1984: 459)

Whatever the answer, the problem promises to open into spheres of differentiation between human and machine languages, organicist (biological) propositions of breath and body in technological terrains, and the materiality and immateriality of forms, among other matters concerning poetics, mass media and the future of international culture.

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