

100 Artists' Manifestos

Edited with an Introduction by Alex Danchev



PENGUIN BOOKS

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M4I Dziga Vertov

WE: Variant of a Manifesto (1922)

Published in the journal *Kinofot* [*Cinema-photo*] 1 (1922) in Moscow – the first appearance in print of the manifesto of the *kinok* group of documentary film-makers formed by Vertov in 1919. *Kinok* ('cinema-eye-man') was his coinage, following the pattern of his other coinages. *Kinoglaz*, universally known as kino-eye, was the name of the movement he led and a kind of shorthand for their principles and their practice; it was also the title of his feature-length film of 1925, which initiates his mature work. *Kinopravda* (*Cinema-truth*) was the name of a film journal he started in 1922, taking its cue from the newspaper started by Lenin (*Pravda*). *Kinopravda* ran for three years and twenty-three issues; it served as a laboratory for his thinking and a shop window for the furious theorizing that emerged. *Kinochestvo* was something like the quality of the Kino-Eye; it was employed in contradistinction to the usual 'cinematography', which tends to be used pejoratively in *kinok* parlance, as redolent of traditionalism, commercialism and, no doubt, bourgeois parasitism.

The original conception of this manifesto went back to 1919. Vertov recorded, as if in a scenario for a film, 'Moscow. The end of 1919. An unheated room. A small vent-window with a broken pane. Next to the window a table. On the table, a glass of yesterday's undrunk tea that has turned to ice. Near the glass is a manuscript. We read: "Manifesto on the Disarmament of Theatrical Cinematography". One of the variants of this manifesto, entitled "WE", was later published in the magazine *Kinofot*. WE was a family affair: Vertov's brother and principal cameraman Mikhail Kaufman (his other brother Boris became the cameraman of choice for Jean Vigo, Elia Kazan and Sidney Lumet), and his life partner and collaborator Elizaveta Svilova (1900–76), an important figure in her own right, the chief editor for Goskino, the state film production agency

(1922–24), and later director of the Central State Studio of Documentary Film.

DZIGA VERTOV (Denis Arkadievitch Kaufman, 1896–1954) was a pioneer Russian documentary film-maker and film theoretician, and also a poet, journalist and Constructivist (see M31 and M44) – a disciple of Mayakovsky (M23) – in short, an artist, blending education, propaganda and thrills in the service of the revolution, not to mention the realization of high art and kino-eye. That was a tall order, and ultimately an impossible one to fulfil, but for a few charged years in the 1920s he took the film, and the form, by the scruff of the neck and showed the world what it might be. His masterpiece, *The Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), is the emblem of that project. Vertov was a transformative presence: a true revolutionary.

His very name was a manifesto. It has Constructivist associations, and translates roughly as 'spinning top'. Vertov trained originally as a musician and neurologist, experimenting with 'sound collages' in his spare time. All of this fed into his film work. Typically, he was expounding his ideas on the use of sound years before it became technically feasible. His own first sound film, *Enthusiasm* (1931), on the Soviet miners of the Donbass, may be the first use of direct sound (recorded on location and woven into something very like a symphony); the nomadic film-maker Chris Marker, a keen student of Vertov, has called it 'the greatest documentary ever made'. Charlie Chaplin, who was searching for a similarly anti-naturalistic way of using sound, wrote a rare testimonial: 'I regard *Enthusiasm* as one of the most moving symphonies I have ever heard. Dziga Vertov is a musician. Professors should learn from him instead of arguing with him.'

Nevertheless, Vertov suffered a vertiginous decline. The conditions for his work disappeared. By 1930, Constructivism, Lenin and Bolshevik idealism were gone, to be replaced by sclerosis, Stalin and socialist realism. Kino-eye and its creator fell out of favour. *Three Songs of Lenin* (1934) was delayed, allegedly because it neglected Stalin. *The Man with a Movie Camera* disappeared from view. Bourgeois as it might be, the fiction film triumphed over the cinema of fact. Vertov was effectively denied the opportunity to make anything he could call his own. Only his life was spared. By the time of his death, in 1954, his name was

reviled in the Soviet Union and very largely forgotten (or unknown) in the West.

Very soon, however, he was brought back to life, by the French. In the late 1960s, the phenomenon that was Jean-Luc Godard named his Marxist film cooperative 'The Dziga Vertov Group'. More significantly, a decade earlier Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin saw and admired Vertov's films and called their new documentary style *cinéma-vérité* in homage to *kinopravda*. The Situationist Guy Debord (M70) was also a film-maker, making his own film version of *The Society of the Spectacle* (1973), complete with a concluding scene from Orson Welles's *Mr Arkadin* (1955) in which Arkadin (Welles) tells his guests the parable of the scorpion who asks a frog to carry him across a river, with fatal consequences for both, accompanied by found footage of a doomed cavalry charge. Debord, too, drew inspiration from Vertov, and from the *kinok* credo that the documentary film-maker's job is to record slices of reality – 'life as it is' or 'life caught unawares' – and then to splice these slices in such a way as to create works of art, without sacrificing the essential truthfulness of the material. 'The goal is to make things on the screen look like "life facts",' as Vertov put it, 'and at the same time to mean more than that.'

That conception of documentary film-making is now all-pervasive. The spinning top has spun his magic the world over. His manifesto sings like Marinetti's.

See also Dogme 95's 'Manifesto' (M91) and Werner Herzog's 'Minnesota Declaration' (M94).

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We call ourselves *kinoks* – as opposed to 'cinematographers', a herd of junkmen doing rather well peddling their rags.

We see no connection between true *kinchestvo* and the cunning and calculation of the profiteers.

We consider the psychological Russo-German film-drama – weighed down with apparitions and childhood memories – an absurdity.

To the American adventure film with its showy dynamism and to the dramatizations of the American Pinkertons the *kinoks* say thanks for the rapid shot changes and the close-ups. Good . . . but disorderly,

not based on a precise study of movement. A cut above the psychological drama, but still lacking in foundation. A cliché. A copy of a copy.

WE proclaim the old films, based on the romance, theatrical films and the like, to be leprous.

- Keep away from them!
- Keep your eyes off them!
- They're mortally dangerous!
- Contagious!

WE affirm the future of cinema art by denying its present.

'Cinematography' must die so that the art of the cinema may live. WE call for its death to be hastened.

WE protest against that mixing of the arts which many call synthesis. The mixture of bad colours, even those ideally selected from the spectrum, produces not white, but mud.

Synthesis should come at the summit of each art's achievement and not before.

WE are cleansing *kinochestvo* of foreign matter – of music, literature and theatre; we seek our own rhythm, one lifted from nowhere else, and we find it in the movements of things.

WE invite you:

- to flee –
- the sweet embraces of the romance,
- the poison of the psychological novel,
- the clutches of the theatre of adultery;
- to turn your back on music,
- to flee –

out into the open, into four dimensions (three + time), in search of our own material, our metre and rhythm.

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 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?

Saws dancing at a sawmill convey to us a joy more intimate and intelligible than that on human dance floors.

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.

In revealing the machine's soul, in causing the worker to love his workbench, the peasant his tractor, the engineer his engine – we introduce creative joy into all mechanical labour, we bring people into closer kinship with machines, we foster new people.

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.

Openly recognizing the rhythm of machines, the delight of mechanical labour, the perception of the beauty of chemical processes, WE sing of earthquakes, we compose film epics of electric power plants and flame, we delight in the movements of comets and meteors and the gestures of searchlights that dazzle the stars.

[. . .]

Cinema is, as well, the *art of inventing movements* of things in space in response to the demands of science; it embodies the inventor's dream – be he scholar, artist, engineer, or carpenter; it is the realization by *kinchestvo* of that which cannot be realized in life.

Drawings in motion. Blueprints in motion. Plans for the future. The theory of relativity on the screen.

WE greet the ordered fantasy of movement.

Our eyes spinning, like propellers, take off into the future on the wings of hypothesis. WE believe that the time is at hand when we shall be able to hurl into space the hurricanes of movement, reined in by our tactical lassoes.

Hurrah for *dynamic geometry*, the race of points, lines, planes, volumes.

Hurrah for the poetry of machines, propelled and driving; the poetry of levers, wheels and wings of steel; the iron cry of movements; the blinding grimaces of red-hot streams.

M42 Theo van Doesburg and others

Manifesto I of De Stijl (1922)

Composed in 1918; first published in *De Stijl* 5 (1922) in Amsterdam.

The De Stijl group was founded in Holland in 1917, dedicated to a synthesis of art, design and architecture. Van Doesburg was its leader and ambassador-at-large. Its members included Gerrit Rietveld, designer of the Red and Blue Chair; J. J. P. Oud, the Municipal Architect for Rotterdam; Piet Mondrian, the great painter of the grid, issuing in a cool *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1942–3); Georges Vantongerloo, Bart van der Leck and Vilmos Huszár. Van Doesburg's relationship with Mondrian, his inspiration, proved easier at one remove; their temperaments clashed, and possibly their geometrical principles. Legend has it that Mondrian never accepted the diagonal, whereas van Doesburg insisted on its dynamic properties – and so they parted, to be reconciled several years later, after a chance meeting in a Paris café.

THEO VAN DOESBURG (Christian Emil Marie Küpper, 1883–1931) was a man of multiple aliases and manifold accomplishments. He took the name of his stepfather, Theo(dorus) Doesburg, and added the 'van'. He painted, promoted De Stijl, and designed all manner of things: homes for artists, decoration for the Café Aubette in Strasbourg, and a geometrically constructed alphabet, revived in digital form as Architype Van Doesburg. He was simultaneously a Constructivist and a Dadaist, publishing *Mécano* (in Leiden), an 'ultra-individualistic, irregular international review for the diffusion of neo-Dada ideas and mental hygiene', under the heteronym I. K. Bonset (possibly an anagram of *Ik ben zot*, 'I am foolish'). *Mécano* advertised Bonset as its literary editor and Van Doesburg as its 'visual arts technician' (*mécanicien plastique*). The latter was already well known as the editor of *De Stijl*; the fact that they were one and the same surprised even the unsurprisable avant-garde.

I. K. Bonset was also an essayist and a derivative Dada manifestoist.