

Dziga Vertov and the Rhythm of the Proletariat

a lecture by John MacKay

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Light Industry at Cleopatra's:

Dziga Vertov and the Rhythm of the Proletariat

A lecture by John MacKay

Dziga Vertov's films have long been known for their dazzling visual rhythms; in the case of his 1929 film *Man with a Movie Camera*, several sequences culminate in flurries of single-frame shots that all but overwhelm the spectator's perceptual capacities. But what motivated, or justified, Vertov's rhythmical practice, especially given the kind of stress that it placed on viewers? Drawing on materials from Vertov's archive, late 19th/early 20th century thought about rhythm, and close analysis of specific films, this talk will probe Vertov's "metrical montage" as a way of mediating between elite filmmakers (or "art workers") on one hand, and the "proletarian" audience on the other. Rhythmical structuring of film acts, for Vertov, was a way of organizing visual data in a way that makes even the most seemingly excessive barrages of images graspable. At the same time, it provides a (figurative) means of linking the radical but non-proletarian filmmaker to proletarian spectators, by taking images drawn from the proletarian machine-milieu as the content of the shots, and by using a fundamentally mechanical/industrial quantum - the individual film frame - as the basic rhythmic unit. It will be argued that the work of the German economist Karl Bücher (especially his 1896 *Arbeit und Rhythmus* [Labor and Rhythm], a book influential in Russia during Vertov's time) possibly had an impact on Vertov through its conceptualization of the origins of rhythm in bodily processes of work, and by questioning the persistence of older modes of rhythmical culture in a context of heavy industrial, mechanized production.

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