A FISTFUL OF FACTS:

RECONSIDERING DZIGA VERTOV'S CINEMATIC TRUTH

by

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ABSTRACT

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In 1919, the Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov declared a "death sentence" on fictional films. Vertov championed his own unique method of non-fiction filmmaking, called Kino-Eye, which is based on Vertov's ideas regarding truth in cinema. Although he does not write specifically about Vertov or film, the philosopher Nelson Goodman offers a contrasting view of truth in general. By comparing the Kino-Eye method to Goodman's philosophy, we can better understand Vertov's radical ideas and see more clearly how the concept of cinematic truth has changed over time.

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Introduction

  Denis Arkadyevich Kaufman was born in the Russian territory of Bialystock in 1896. He would later change his name to Dziga Vertov, which translates roughly as "spinning top." Vertov was one of the key figures in the formative, tumultuous days of Soviet cinema. As a part of the artistic community navigating through the Russian Revolution, Soviet filmmakers produced works that reflected the fever of the political uprising. Cinema itself was in a period of transition. Only twenty years after motion pictures were first exhibited to the public by filmmakers such as Louis Lumière and Georges Méliès, new equipment and techniques were emerging, and film theory as we know it today was beginning to take shape. While his contemporaries, including the director Sergei Eisenstein, developed their filmmaking methods in tandem with the general technological and theoretical progress occurring throughout the international film community, Vertov was determined to create a singular approach to cinema that would be tied specifically to the Russian Revolution. Other Soviet filmmakers produced works that commented on the revolution, but Vertov's cinematic theory would be born of the revolution itself.

  The predominant style of filmmaking at the time was one that had grown out of live theater. Fictional stage plays and literary works translated easily to the new medium, and the resulting films became very popular. In movie theaters, newsreels and informative or educational films had to settle for second billing behind fictional films. Vertov, who worked as a newsreel producer, was dissatisfied with the

dominance of the fictional film over the informative film, claiming that the "theatrical" fictional films failed to properly acknowledge the struggle of Russia's proletariat working class. Robert Stam writes, "Vertov advocated documentary filming in the streets, far from studios, in order to show people without masks or makeup and to reveal what lurks beneath the surfaces of social phenomena."[1] Vertov continued making political newsreels, but also produced and directed a number of feature-length films throughout the 1920s and early 1930s. *The Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) is perhaps Vertov's most well-known film. It represents a synthesis of his filmmaking techniques and theoretical viewpoints. It has also been called "one of the densest, most complex and experimental films ever created."[2] A kinetic tour of daily life in Moscow, *The Man with a Movie Camera* is extremely difficult to categorize, but it is perhaps the best example of Vertov's cinematic philosophy, which he dubbed "kino-eye," meaning literally "film-eye." The kino-eye approach to film was characterized by its strict rejection of any and all fictional elements.

Stam describes Vertov's filmmaking as "documentary," but it is important to note that at the beginning of Vertov's career as a filmmaker, "documentary" was a relatively new term. Though a documentary is commonly understood to be a film that attempts to exhibit authentically something from real life, the definition of "documentary film" remains highly contested even today. Brian Winston offers a general insight into the various attempts to define documentary film. He writes, "I know of no theoretical position, no definition of documentary that does not in some

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[1] Robert Stam, *Film Theory: An Introduction* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), 45.
[2] Jack C. Ellis, *The Documentary Idea* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1989), 36.

way reference that relationship [between image and reality]."[3] Taking into account the many definitions of documentary alluded to by Winston as well as other film theorists, I will attempt to use the word as rarely as possible. For this work, I will instead use the term "non-fiction," meaning simply "not fiction."

In terms of the relationship between image and reality, Vertov believed the motion picture camera could produce images that represented reality more truthfully than the human eye could perceive on its own. The superiority of the camera over the human eye is one of the main points in the kino-eye approach to truth. Vertov's ideas regarding truth in cinema are as complex and dense as his films. His writings were stylized and formatted in unusual ways, and in this thesis I will reproduce quotes from Vertov as they appear in a 1984 anthology of his written work complied by Annette Michelson and Kevin O'Brien. We must keep in mind that Vertov was a filmmaker and not an academic author. Though his theories may seem fragmented and at times even contradictory, we should not forget that they were composed by a man very deeply involved in one of the defining political revolutions of the past century. I will show that by reconsidering them in a philosophical context, we can better understand Vertov's radical theories and see more clearly how the concept of cinematic truth has changed over time.

Though he never referenced Vertov specifically, the philosopher Nelson Goodman provides what I believe to be an appropriate counterpoint to the kino-eye philosophy. Goodman, born in 1906 in Somerville, Massachusetts, studied the

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[3] Brian Winston, *Claiming the Real* (London: British Film Institute, 1995), 6.

philosophy of art, focusing on painting, music, literature and the photographic image. In 1967, Goodman worked with the Harvard University Graduate School of Education to found Project Zero, an organization that seeks "to understand and enhance learning, thinking, and creativity in the arts, as well as humanistic and scientific disciplines, at the individual and institutional levels."[4] Goodman's theories are arguably more dense and complicated than Vertov's. It is not my intention to examine the breadth of Goodman's work, but only those portions that can be used to understand Vertov's philosophy in a new way. I am not setting out to make a case for or against Goodman's theories. Rather, I intend to show that if Goodman's views are taken to be right, then certain problems in Vertov's cinematic truth become apparent and a different approach should be sought.

I believe that such an approach is offered by the contemporary filmmaker Werner Herzog, whose own unique definition of cinematic truth may be compatible with Goodman's philosophy. Herzog works in both fiction and non-fiction, but he is hesitant to make such distinctions. Herzog's fiction films include *Fitzcarraldo* (1982) and *Aguirre, Wrath of God* (1972), while *Grizzly Man* (2005) and *Lessons of Darkness* (1992) are well-known examples of his non-fiction. I will discuss a related pair of Herzog's films: *Little Dieter Needs to Fly* (1997), a non-fiction work about the life of a German-born pilot of the American Air Force, and *Rescue Dawn* (2006), a fictionalized version of *Little Dieter*. *Rescue Dawn* is a fictional film based on real events, and *Little Dieter* is a non-fiction film that contains many obviously

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[4] *History of Project Zero* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2008, accessed 21 January 2008); available from http://www.pz.harvard.edu/History/History.htm; Internet.

dramatized and theatrical elements, but both films serve as examples of Herzog's approach to cinematic truth. We must keep in mind that like Vertov, Herzog is not an academic theorist. His ideas regarding truth in cinema are somewhat vague, but in the context of film theory they stand at the opposite end of the spectrum from Vertov's views. I will use selections of Goodman's philosophy to bridge the gap between the very different ideas presented by Vertov and Herzog. I will show that if Goodman's theories are taken to be right, then Herzog offers a more fitting cinematic truth than does Vertov.

Finally, after comparing Vertov's methods to Goodman's philosophy and Herzog's approach, I will discuss a fictional film that offers what I believe to be valuable satire of non-fiction film theory. The comedy *Real Life* (1979), directed by Albert Brooks, tells the story of an egotistical filmmaker who sets out to create an ambitious non-fiction film, but eventually succumbs to his own fictional and theatrical tendencies as his project implodes. *Real Life* contains direct allusions to Vertov's theories and the plot of the film closely mirrors the path of Vertov's career. It is not clear whether these allusions were intentional, but the filmmaker character does not appear to be based on Vertov, mainly because Vertov had a genuine desire to create non-fiction films in support of the proletariat working class while the filmmaker in *Real Life* is revealed almost instantly to be a delusional showman. Nevertheless, as the non-fiction project at the center of *Real Life* comes undone under the pressure of fictional theatrics, one could draw a clear parallel to the way the kino-

eye movement eventually faded away in the shadow of fictional cinema and new

approaches to non-fiction.

Chapter 1: Dziga Vertov

A staunch Communist living in Russia during a tumultuous time of revolution, Vertov was informed in his work as a filmmaker by his political commitments. During the Russian civil war, Vertov traveled to various battlefronts on a government propaganda train (alternately known as an agitation train or an agit-train). Such trains were equipped with facilities for various forms of performance and media with the aim of improving the morale of the soldiers and spreading propaganda to the citizens. Vertov would later write that "Comrade Lenin attached great significance to the use of film in the work of agitational trains and steamers."[5] On the agit-train, Vertov exhibited newsreels and gathered footage for future newsreels. The series of newsreels on which Vertov worked was called *Kinopravda*, meaning literally "film truth." The name was also an allusion to *Pravda*, a Soviet newspaper. Vertov would later apply the themes and techniques of *Kinopravda* to more ambitious post-war projects, most of which focused on the struggle in Russia between the poor proletariat working class and the wealthy bourgeoisie.

Vertov believed that the bourgeoisie had a stranglehold on the practice of cinema in Russia, producing films of a highly dramatic and artistic nature. Such fictional films were often referred to by Vertov as theatrical films, in that they adopted techniques of storytelling and production from the world of theatre. Vertov railed against bourgeoisie filmmakers for making theatrics and entertainment the

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[5] Dziga Vertov, "About Love for the Living Person," in *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov* ed. Annette Michelson (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 151.

main function of cinema. He saw theatrical entertainment as a means of distracting the proletariat from their socioeconomic struggle. For Vertov, theatrical films were actively harmful to the proletariat in two ways. First, as the main form of cinema at the time, they created a kind of filter through which relevant and authentic depictions of Soviet life could not pass. That the movie screens showed actors playing drama was not necessarily the problem; it was that they were showing actors playing drama instead of showing real people living their actual lives. Vertov claimed that if the proletariat audiences saw more films depicting the reality of their living and working conditions, they would become more aware of the gap between bourgeoisie and proletariat life.

Second, Vertov believed that the very act of watching a theatrical film made the proletariat viewer susceptible to influence by the bourgeoisie. He declares that "the essence of the artistic drama (like that of the theatrical drama) is to act out before the viewer a romantic, detective, or social 'fairy tale' adroitly and convincingly enough to put him in a state of intoxication and to cram some idea, some thought or other, into his subconscious."[6] Having often characterized the theatrical films' influence over the proletariat as a kind of hypnosis, Vertov sought to break the spell.

While working as a newsreel editor and war correspondent in 1919, he declared a "death sentence" on theatrical films, which he would later expand on, writing in a 1922 manifesto, "WE proclaim the old films, based on the romance,

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[6] Vertov, "Kino-Eye," in *Kino-Eye*, ed. Michelson, 63.

theatrical films and the like, to be leprous."[7] After the civil war, Vertov sought to put

such films, detective stories, musicals and the like, into a secondary role beneath the

non-fiction, experimental cinema that would come to be known as kino-eye ("cinema-

eye").

Kino-eye films were meant to empower the proletariat by representing the

reality of the Russian class struggle through Vertov's theory of cinematic truth, which

consisted partly of gathering unscripted and unrehearsed footage of daily life in the

streets of Russia, far from the studios where scripted theatrical films were produced.

Vertov sought to wake the proletariat masses from the numb state induced by the

enchanting bourgeoisie films with authentic representations of lower class living and

working conditions. One of his techniques was to make films which depicted the step

by step process of creating a given product. Vertov believed that "in disclosing the

origins of objects and of bread, the camera makes it possible for every worker to

acquire, through evidence, the conviction that he, the worker, creates all these things

himself, and that consequently they belong to him."[8] Vertov would write extensively

about physical labor, often equating kino-eye film production with factory work.

Annette Michelson explains, "[Vertov] situates the production of film in direct and

telling juxtaposition to that other particular sector, the textile industry, which has for

Marx and Engels a status that is paradigmatic within the history of material

production."[9] In the textile industry and other areas of production, Vertov saw the

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[7] Vertov, "WE: Variant of a Manifesto," in *Kino-Eye*, ed. Michelson, 7.
[8] Vertov, "On the Film Known as *Kinoglaz*," in *Kino-Eye*, ed. Michelson, 34.
[9] Michelson, xxxvii.

kind of disjointedness between workers that Marx writes of in his work *Estranged Labour*.

Marx believes that factory workers have become completely separated from the products of their labor as a result of the capitalist economic system. That the working class is not involved in the means of production beyond their places on the assembly lines results in a disconnect between the workers and the objects they produce. In a capitalist economic system, Marx believes, "the object which labour produces--labour's product--confronts it as *something alien*, as a *power independent* of the producer."[10] What Marx means by this is that in a capitalist society, the owners of the means of production benefit from the results of a system of production and labor significantly more so than the workers who physically engage in the act of production itself. Marx writes, "it is true that labour produces for the rich wonderful things--but for the worker it produces privation. It produces palaces--but for the worker, hovels. It produces beauty--but for the worker, deformity."[11] The system of owners and workers inherent to capitalist economics causes workers to view the materials they produce as tangible representations of their labor, something Marx refers to as, literally, "the objectification of labour." The objects of the workers' labor are then purchased by the wealthy bourgeoisie, extending the rift between the products and the people who physically produce them.

This disconnect is only the first stage of estrangement, according to Marx. He writes that "the estrangement is manifested not only in the result but in the act of

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[10] Robert C. Tucker, *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1972), 71.
[11] Tucker, 73.

production--within the producing activity itself."[12]   Now, Marx declares, the worker

becomes separated not only from the product but from the very activity of producing

the product.   Consequently, once the worker is separated from the act of physical

labor, he becomes alienated from his fellow workers.   Marx writes that "labour is

external to the worker, i.e., it does not belong to his essential being; that in his work,

therefore, he does not affirm but denies himself."[13]   Once bound by the act of labor,

Marx believes, workers become isolated participants in a process that is completely

meaningless to them and detrimental to their humanity, because the work is being

done to the benefit of someone besides the worker.   Marx calls the kind of labor

practiced by factory workers "forced labour," declaring that in such labor practices,

"the worker's activity is not his spontaneous activity. It belongs to another; it is the

loss of [the worker's] self."[14]   In other words, because the workers own neither the

products they produce or the means of production, they have little claim to ownership

of the act of their own physical labour.

Although he does not specifically reference Marx's writings on the subject,

Vertov proposes a solution to the estrangement of labor by attempting to reduce the

distance between the product, the labor, the worker and the other workers.   He seeks

to do so by creating films that would make workers more familiar with the fruits of

their labor and help them better understand how workers depend on each other.

Vertov declares:

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[12] Tucker, 73.
[13] Tucker, 74.
[14] Tucker, 74.

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The textile worker ought to see the worker in a factory making a machine essential to the textile worker. The worker at the machine tool plant ought to see the miner who gives his factory its essential fuel, coal. The coal miner ought to see the peasant who produces the bread essential to him. Workers ought to see one another so that a close, indissoluble bond can be established among them.[15]

Vertov wanted to make films that would show the proletariat exactly how their labor benefited themselves and other members of the working class. By showcasing, and in a way celebrating, the connections between various forms of proletariat labor, Vertov would be combating the isolation imposed upon workers by the capitalist system with a new sense of working class unity born in the cinema. With the kinok group, Vertov sought to create a closely knit community of filmmakers that would serve as a model for the kind of unity he wished to see among factory workers. The kinoks' celebration of physical labor is exemplified in a sequence in Vertov's film *The Man with the Movie Camera* in which we see the editor of the film, Elizaveta Svilova, cutting the very film we are watching.[16] Here Vertov highlights the production of a product in the very product itself.

Vertov used his recurring association between factory work and film work to translate the Russian class struggle into the terms of cinema. Vertov considered actors, sets, makeup, costumes, scripts, and the common ideas of art, wealth, literature, drama, and theatre all to be decidedly bourgeoisie concepts. Consequently, the proletariat would be served and empowered by a cinema based on the removal of such elements and the celebration of labor skills and machinery. Vertov wrote:

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[15] Vertov, "*Kinopravda & Radiopravda,*" in *Kino-Eye*, Michelson, 52.
[16] Dziga Vertov and others. <u>Man with a Movie Camera</u>. 1929. 1 DVD (68 min.) video recording. Kino Video, 2003.

In undressing a flirtatious bourgeoisie and a bloated bourgeois, and in returning food and objects to the workers and peasants who've made them, we are giving millions of laborers the opportunity to see the truth and to question the need to dress and feed a castle of parasites.[17]

The bond between the theories of Vertov and Marx lies not only in their shared Communist ideologies, but also in the language and types of metaphor used in their respective writings. On the topic of religion, which he views partly as a weapon of the bourgeoisie, Marx writes, "It is the opium of the people. The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness."[18] Not only do such statements appear to inform Vertov's criticisms of the illusory obscurations in theatrical cinema, but they also offer metaphors of narcotics and religion that appear as recurring themes in Vertov's writing. Vertov demands, "We must stubbornly fight the seizure of production by high priest-directors and resist filling the market with film-junk."[19] Such is one of many occasions in which Vertov describes the producers of popular bourgeoisie cinema as royal or religious figureheads who supply the masses with illusions meant to reinforce the complacency of the proletariat class.

Theatrical cinema is depicted by Vertov as a narcotic peddled to the proletariat by bourgeoisie producers and directors. He asks his fellow filmmakers, "Are we really obliged, in the name of profit, to make drunkards of the proletariat, using cinema-vodka, spiked with the antidote of propagandistic powder?"[20] Vertov's comparison of theatrical cinema to alcohol—or, occasionally, to nicotine or opium—

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[17] Vertov, "On the Film Known as *Kinoglaz*," in *Kino-Eye*, ed. Michelson, 34.
[18] Tucker, 54.
[19] Vertov, "To the Kinoks of the South," in *Kino-Eye*, ed. Michelson, 50.
[20] Vertov, "Artistic Drama and Kino-Eye," in *Kino-Eye*, ed. Michelson, 48.

recalls the Marxist opinion that the bourgeoisie is in a constant struggle to keep the proletariat numb to the constrictive confines of their class status. Vertov, coming from a background of non-fiction newsreel production and political activism through media, sees kino-eye as a method of detoxification for the proletariat addicts. "Kino-drama," he believes, "clouds the eye and brain with a sweet fog. Kino-eye opens the eyes, clears the vision."[21] However, Vertov recognizes that such a perceived addiction to theatrical cinema will not be easily undone. He anticipates that the kino-eye style, which was so popular on the agit-train battlefront tours, will not be easily embraced by movie theaters full of proletariat drama-addicts. He writes:

> The effect of the artistic drama on the steady viewer is that of the customary cigar or cigarette on the smoker. Poisoned by film-nicotine, the viewer sticks like a leech to the screen that tickles his nerves. A film-object made of newsreel footage [a kino-eye film] will do much to sober this viewer, and, if we're speaking of taste, will seem to him *an unpleasant antidote*.[22]

Vertov's prediction of the public's unfavorable reaction to kino-eye recalls the allegory of the cave from Plato's Republic. A group of prisoners is chained inside a cave, unable to turn their heads from the shadows their captors project on the wall before them. The captors produce these shadows using "statues of people and other animals, made out of stone, wood and every material."[23] The prisoners accept the shadows as reality because the shadow show constitutes the entirety of their sensory experience. Plato writes that "the prisoners would in every way believe that the truth is nothing other than the shadows of those artifacts."[24] Plato goes on to imagine a

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[21] Vertov, "Artistic Drama and Kino-Eye," in *Kino-Eye*, ed. Michelson, 48.
[22] Vertov, "Kino-Eye," in *Kino-Eye*, ed. Michelson, 62.
[23] Plato, *Republic VII*, 514b-514c.
[24] Plato, 515c.

prisoner who escapes from the darkened cave into the harsh sunlight of the world above. Returning to the cave to expose the deception to the other prisoners, he is met with severe doubt and skepticism.

Vertov casts himself in the role of the escaped prisoner, suspecting that mass audiences will not like the "taste" of kino-eye, if only because the content and style of his group's films are so radically different from what audiences are accustomed to. Although he does not reference Plato's allegory directly, Vertov draws a clear parallel here between the blinding light of the world outside the cave faced by the escaped prisoner and the realist content of the kino-eye films. Neither claims of reality would be easily accepted by the public. Plato writes:

> Wouldn't it be said of [the escaped prisoner] that he'd returned from his upward journey with his eyesight ruined and that it wasn't worthwhile even to try to travel upward? And, as for anyone who tried to free them and lead them upward, if they could somehow get their hands on him, wouldn't they kill him?[25]

Just as those in Plato's cave who attempt to liberate the group of prisoners would be doubted and ultimately put to death by the other prisoners, Vertov faces considerable criticism from his peers in cinema. Critics deem his work inaccessible, and one particular newsreel is called "insane"[26] The theorist Viktor Shklovsky and the filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein each wage a long battle with Vertov over his films' lack of plot and traditional cinematic structure. In time, Vertov witnesses the ultimate withering of the kino-eye process, evident by the fact that though certain technical

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[25] Plato, 517a.
[26] Vertov, "On *Kinopravda*," in *Kino-Eye*, ed. Michelson, 43.

and thematic aspects of kino-eye have been adopted by various styles and genres of film, the theatrical cinema which Vertov fought against has remained dominant.

Vertov suggests that the proletariat class is as much imprisoned by the bourgeoisie as those inside Plato's cave are held by their unseen captors. For Vertov, the theatrical and romantic cinema of fiction amounts to little more than empty shadows on the wall, projecting a reality forever unattainable by those conditioned to enjoy its visual representation, and distracting the proletariat audience from the poor working and living conditions inherent to their low socio-economic standing. Vertov attempts to succeed where Plato's enlightened prisoner failed by using the visual language of cinema as a means of representing the world unseen by the other prisoners. Vertov, the escaped proletariat prisoner, films the "real" world and exhibits his cinematic representation of the world beyond the cave to the remaining prisoners.

Here, however, Vertov arrives at a basic contradiction noted by many of his critics. Vertov seeks to communicate his idea of the real world through cinema. He attempts to expose the captors' shadows by replacing them with different shadows. This contradiction is the beginning of most debates regarding the idea of cinematic truth, but for Vertov, it is the starting point for a radical approach to film that remains unequaled. The cornerstone of Vertov's theory of cinematic truth is his claim that the shadows produced by the bourgeoisie are not representative of the real world because they are created with theatrical elements and artistic tendencies that aim to mask or disguise reality, while his shadows are undiluted representations of the real world.

Chapter 2: Kino-Eye Truth

In order to understand Dziga Vertov's cinematic truth, we must examine what Vertov does not consider to be true in the cinematic sense. His approach to truth in cinema is a reaction to the ways in which he believes truth and reality have thus far been obscured by the dominant film practices of his time. In his writings, as well as his filmmaking practice, Vertov rejects the theatrical artificiality of the bourgeoisie cinema and the techniques that it makes use of, namely actors, makeup, artificial sets, and scriptwriting. He views these techniques as methods of obscuring reality and distracting the proletariat from relevant social issues. To better understand Vertov's approach to cinematic truth, we must examine how and why kino-eye reportedly overcomes each of the methods of artificiality that Vertov singles out.

Vertov is against the use of actors, not only because they serve partly as vessels for their scripted dialogue, but mainly because they present a kind of artificial beauty and behavior. He prefers "to show people without masks, without makeup; to catch them with the camera's eye in a moment of nonacting. To read their thoughts, laid bare by kino-eye."[27] Vertov instructed his followers to film, whenever possible, in secret. Ideally, the subjects of the film should not know they are being filmed.

Filming a subject secretly (filming "unawares," as Vertov called it) was one of many techniques employed by kino-eye filmmakers to observe people in their own communities the way they would be observed on a daily basis without the presence of

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[27] Vertov, "*Kinopravda* [1934]," in *Kino-Eye*, ed. Michelson, 131.

a camera. Vertov seems to regard actors as real people whose actual appearances and behaviors are obscured by the masks, makeup and costumes of theatricality. By filming unawares, Vertov hopes to keep these dramatic masks away from the proletariat subjects of his films. The goal of this practice may be that Vertov's target audience, the working masses, will be able to identify more closely with the people displayed on the movie screens in kino-eye films than they would with the dramatic actors in theatrical films. Vertov was not alone in his dismissal of traditional acting from cinema. The filmmaker and theorist Lev Kuleshov also called for a separation of theatre and cinema in general, and the rejection of theatre-trained actors in particular. Kuleshov "felt that the weakness of theatre lay in its artifice and its isolation from contemporary reality and feared that this weakness might infect cinema."[28] Both men want to free cinema from theater, which they believe to be a corrupting influence.

Whereas actors are seen by Vertov as representatives of reality obscured by masks, makeup and scripts, movie sets are viewed as entirely artificial imitations. Though Vertov does not write specifically about the literal construction of sets in filmmaking, he frequently encourages kino-eye filmmakers to work outside, in the streets of their communities. One could assume Vertov's position and derive an argument against constructed sets that reaches even deeper than his case against actors. Keeping in mind Vertov's adherence to the Communist ideology and his Marxist view of labor, it is reasonable to assume that he would view the work put into

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[28] Ian Christie and Richard Taylor, *The Film Factory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 54.

the building of an artificial set, arguably more laborious than the work required to produce makeup or costumes, as being in vain because it is contributing to the overall artificiality of the theatrical film. Vertov implies that by producing artificial sets, proletariat workers are contributing to an industry of cinema that ultimately effects the working class in a negative way. Given that the parallel between filmmaker and builder is one which recurs often in Vertov's writings in addition to an overall admiration for proletariat occupations, it is reasonable to suggest that the building of sets by workers for theatrical films would be viewed by Vertov as being particularly unjust and contributing to, in Marx's terms, the alienation of the worker from the products he produces.

Vertov also views the use of artificial sets as limiting the potential of the camera to document real places outside of a studio. He makes repeated assertions that the camera should travel great distances and explore unlimited settings:

> I [kino-eye] move apace with the muzzle of a galloping horse, I plunge full-speed into a crowd, I outstrip running soldiers, I fall on my back, I ascend with an airplane, I plunge and soar with plunging and soaring bodies.[29]

As Vertov seeks to push the limits of the mobility of the camera, he would most likely view sets as a means of containing the camera and restricting its movement, which Vertov believes should be as free and far-reaching as possible. Of course it is only with the aid of constructed sets that we can make films that take place in distant worlds or long-past time periods, but these settings are ultimately,

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[29] Vertov, "Kinoks: A Revolution," in *Kino-Eye*, ed. Michelson, 17.

literally, artificial. Therefore they would be viewed by Vertov as illusions obscuring the truth of the real world and its present time and location.

A similar problem is posed, Vertov believes, by the use of a script in cinema. Vertov often describes life as chaotic, constantly moving in multiple directions. His argument against using scripts in cinema is that a script attempts to manipulate the unwieldy movement of life and impose restrictions from the writer's pen in much the same way that the artificial set restricts the camera's mobility: "Kinopravda doesn't order life to proceed according to a writer's scenario but observes and records life as it is, and only then draws conclusions from these observations."[30] In other words, theatrical cinema is restricted to scripted scenarios, while kino-eye filmmakers have more freedom to observe a variety of phenomena around them.

Vertov believed that theatrical cinema could co-exist with kino-eye films, but on the condition that they account for only a small percentage of a theater's program. He insisted on a standard theatrical bill which would consist of forty-five percent kino-eye films, thirty percent scientific and educational films, and the remaining twenty-five percent allotted to artistic drama.[31] Here we see that Vertov did not seek to do away with theatrical cinema completely. His goal was to make unstaged kino-eye films the dominant form of cinema.

Theatrical cinema, according to Vertov, reverses what he believes to be the proper process of developing thematic content in motion pictures. A scripted film begins on the page and is manufactured physically before the lens according to the

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[30] Vertov, "On *Kinopravda*," in *Kino-Eye*, ed. Michelson, 45.
[31] Vertov, "*Kinopravda* & *Radiopravda*," in Kino-Eye, ed. Michelson, 55.

director's interpretation of the writer's script. Though kino-eye filmmakers may begin their work with an eye towards a general theme, it is the footage that they gather during filming which ultimately determines the specific thematic content of the finished film. Vlada Petric clarifies, however, that the kinoks did not film their surroundings at random. He writes, "Vertov [insisted] that from the very beginning of filming, the filmmaker must select details from reality, not merely shoot them at random, as Vertov's method is often wrongly described."[32] The filming practices of the kinoks may have appeared random or chaotic, but the "selection of details," in Petric's terms, was often guided by a theme. Vertov instructed his fellow kinoks to select a theme and then gather footage from real life that is relevant to the theme. The themes suggested by Vertov to the kinoks are different from scripted scenarios because they give the filmmaker the freedom to gather the footage that he feels fits with the theme. A scripted scenario, on the other hand, dictates specifically and exactly what must be filmed. Note that Petric is not criticizing Vertov's argument against the use of scripts, but merely helping to clarify the differences between the kino-eye projects and the theatrical films.

It is important to distinguish between the terms "scenario" and "theme." For Vertov, a scenario in film is what is commonly referred to as a "plot," with all the specific chronological progression therein. A theme, however, is a general idea that is communicated to the viewer through the entirety of the film. A theme could be

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[32] Vlada Petric, "Dziga Vertov as Theorist," *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 18, No. 1. (Autumn 1978): 33.

present in both scripted and non-scripted (kino-eye) films, but a scenario, in Vertov's terms, is exclusive to the scripted film:

> I was for an almost "iron-clad" scenario where the acted film was concerned. And I was at the same time against a "scenario" for the nonacted, that is, the nonstaged film. I felt that a "scenario for the unstaged film" was an absurdity.[33]

Here again, kino-eye film is defined by what it does not contain (in this case, a scripted scenario). Acted film is similarly characterized by the specific artificial elements that it does contain, namely scripts, actors, makeup and sets. These elements are seen by Vertov as factors which obscure the truth. The scripted story is unique in its distortion according to Vertov because it seeks to restrict the entirety of life according to a pre-determined scenario, even if the scenario is based on actual historic events.

The application of kino-eye methods to films of a scripted nature angered Vertov, and he warned his fellow kinoks of such cinematic misappropriation. Of these types of films, Vertov wrote, "in some, actors will portray real life in an appropriate setting; in others real people will act out roles according to highly refined scenarios."[34] Here Vertov inadvertently defines what would come to be known as the docudrama, a film with a scenario that is based on real events and may sometimes be filmed in a non-fiction (or documentary) style.

The preeminent example of this genre may be director Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers*, a 1966 film depicting the French-Algerian struggle, composed of

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[33] Vertov, "About Love for the Living Person," in *Kino-Eye*, ed. Michelson, 155.
[34] Vertov, "On *Kinopravda*," in *Kino-Eye*, ed. Michelson, 47.

staged events filmed with a rugged and mobile documentary approach. Although he did not live to see Pontecorvo's film, Vertov would have most likely been disappointed with its recreation of real events using willing participants. The proper way to communicate historic events cinematically, according to Vertov, is through newsreel films and films constructed from newsreel archival footage. He stresses the importance of storing and cataloguing film footage properly so that in the future it may be utilized easily by editors.[35] Vertov clearly favors the use of archival footage over the staged recreation of past events. Such recreations would be deemed imitations of the actual truth of the events depicted. Vertov would be equally displeased with the application of kino-eye cinematographic and editing techniques to purely fictional stories, which was one defining characteristic of the Italian Neorealism and French New Wave movements of the 1940s and 1950s.

In Italy, the war had caused considerable damage to the legendary Cinecittà film studio in Rome, making it difficult for filmmakers to obtain equipment or work on a set. Consequently, "Neorealist [filmmaking] relied on actual locales, and its photographic work tended toward the raw roughness of documentaries."[36] The destruction of Cinecittà had driven the theatrical filmmakers of Italy out into the war-torn streets. Vertov would have most likely encouraged the Italians to seize the move from Cinecittà as an opportunity to convert to non-fiction filmmaking, but the filmmakers instead adapted their methods of creating fiction to suit the circumstances.

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[35] Vertov, "The Same Thing From Different Angles," in *Kino-Eye*, ed. Michelson, 57.
[36] David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction, 8th Ed.* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008), 459.

Films of this movement often contained a mix of actors and non-actors in fictional stories that were loosely plotted, though still scripted, and often addressed social and political issues relevant to Italy after the war. The Italian Neorealists incorporated the technical style of non-fiction filmmaking that had been pioneered in part by Vertov into their fictional stories.

The French New Wave movement of the late 1950s was directly inspired by the films of post-war Italy. Young French filmmakers such as François Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard "had admired the Neorealists (especially [Roberto] Rossellini) and, in opposition to studio filmmaking, [worked in] actual locales in and around Paris."[37] While the Italians' post-war filmmaking style was born out of necessity, the French New Wave was meant as an artistic revolution against the dominant French studio system. The young rebels used Italian Neorealism as a template for their own unique style. Though the two groups produced very different kinds of stories, they had in common the application of non-fiction techniques to fiction filmmaking. Had Vertov lived to witness the Italian Neorealist and French New Wave movements, he would have most likely dismissed them both as imitative of kino-eye.

Vertov frequently brought charges of kino-eye imitation upon his contemporaries, specifically the filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein. Eisenstein and Vertov argued throughout the revolutionary period, with Eisenstein calling Vertov's ultimate kino-eye experiment--*The Man With a Movie Camera* (1929)--a work of "formalist

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[37] Bordwell, 462.

jackstraws and unmotivated camera mischief."[38] Eisenstein had incorporated similar "camera mischief" into his 1925 film *Strike*, about a group of proletariat workers who rebel against the owners of a factory. Although the film does not attempt to hide its theatrical methods (for example, its use of actors), it has much in common with the work of the kinoks in terms of its visual and editing style.

Strike recalls the distinction between scenario and theme. It shares the theme of most kino-eye films of the revolutionary era (the struggle of the proletariat worker against the bourgeoisie upper class), but the theme is expressed through a pre-determined scenario and a script. *Strike* also makes use of kino-eye filming and editing techniques, but applies them to its dramatized story. Eisenstein's film is similar to *The Battle of Algiers* in that they both depict a very immediate political and societal happening with a specific non-fiction-style approach, but they do so with recreated and staged events. The themes of both films echo the spirit of kino-eye in some respects, but the process by which the themes are manifested results in a kind of cinema that Vertov would call imitative and, more importantly, untruthful.

Now we have examined the ways in which Vertov believes truth is obscured in cinema. However, to better understand the methods by which truth is revealed, and to clarify what Vertov means by cinematic truth, we must look at these individual factors within the larger context of the filmmaking process. According to Vertov, elements such as actors, makeup, costumes and sets obscure reality within the literal boundaries of a single frame of film, just as a person wearing a mask would have his

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[38] Michelson, xx.

face obscured in a photograph. While it is logical to assert that such theatrical elements are as much a part of reality as the original things which they correspond to (for example, a costume worn by an actor), Vertov sees the application of these elements as contributing to an ultimate goal of distortion.

The preservation of truth within the individual frames of a motion picture may be referred to as "ontological authenticity." A term originated by the Soviet editor Esfir Shub, ontological authenticity is described by Vlada Petric:

> [It is] the term which implies the illusionistic as well as factual denotation of motion picture photography, giving the viewer a strong feeling that the objects and events actually existed as such at the time when the image was exposed.[39]

This kind of authenticity would be compromised by the visual theatrical elements Vertov campaigned against. Between the numerous frames, however, it is the scripted scenario that obscures the truth, with each individual frame tied to the next by an artificial story. In the kinds of theatrical films Vertov claimed were imitative of kino-eye, the ontological authenticity of the frame may be present by the use of non-actors in real settings, but if the connection between the frames is determined first by a writer, the film would be called untruthful by Vertov. Inversely, the action that takes place throughout a different kind of film may be highly realistic or improvised without the aid of a scripted scenario, but if the individual frames are populated with actors playing roles, neither is this type of film truthful. The key to kino-eye truth, therefore, is a complete realism both inside and between the frames of a motion picture.

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[39] Petric, 43.

An overarching theme in Vertov's writing is the comparison of this kino-eye truth to the "truth" perceived by the human eye. Frequently declaring the movie camera an improvement over the human eye, he assumes the voice of the camera itself and declares: "I am kino-eye, I am a mechanical eye. I, a machine, show you the world as only I can see it."[40] The anthropomorphizing of the camera continues throughout Vertov's writing. He assigns the machine human characteristics, and in turn describes the human faculty of sight as a mechanical function, albeit a limited one. Vertov writes, "the position of our bodies while observing or our perception of a certain number of features of a visual phenomenon in a given instant are by no means obligatory limitations for the camera which, since it is perfected, perceives more and better."[41] The idea of the camera being able to see "more" suggests that completeness is a defining aspect of cinematic truth for Vertov. He references other tools which improve upon specific limitations of human visual perception and form what one might call a more complete representation of the object in sight. Of these instruments, he writes, "[the microscope] penetrates where the eye of my movie camera cannot. The eye of the telescope reaches distant worlds, inaccessible to my naked eye."[42] In the case of the microscope, the goal is to make a nearly invisibly small object appear much larger than it actually is, so it can be seen in greater detail. The goal of the telescope is to traverse the obstacle of distance, bringing far away images into a realm of perceivable visual clarity.

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[40] Vertov, "Kinoks: A Revolution," in *Kino-Eye*, ed. Michelson, 17.
[41] Vertov, "Kinoks: A Revolution," in *Kino-Eye*, ed. Michelson, 15.
[42] Vertov, "The Birth of Kino-Eye," in *Kino-Eye*, ed. Michelson, 41.

The goal of kino-eye, reaching further than either scientific instrument, is no less than "the sensory exploration of the world through film."[43] For Vertov, the fact that life is spread, naturally, across time and space merely presents an obstacle of sensory perception no different than that of the obstacles of size and distance overcome by the microscope and the telescope. Through kino-eye filming and editing, Vertov aims to present viewers with a concise and authentic organization of the visual phenomenon that surrounds them.

Vertov believes the eye of the motion picture camera is an improvement over the human eye because it is free from the natural limitations of human mobility, but we must clarify that he also understands that the camera is only as mobile as its operator. The free and far-reaching movement of kino-eye is achieved, therefore, through the combination of the act of filming and the process of film editing. When Vertov assumes the anthropomorphized voice of kino-eye, we realize that he is not only speaking as the physical camera itself, but as the entirety of the process of filming and editing. We must examine the human limitations on perception, space and time with respect to the solutions Vertov poses with kino-eye.

Cinema can present to an audience a setting from thousands of miles away. Vertov writes, "free of the limits of time and space, I [kino-eye] put together any given points in the universe, no matter where I've recorded them."[44] This idea is the key component of the travelogue film, very popular in early days of cinema, which aims to present audiences with visual information from various points around the

[43] Vertov, "Kinoks: A Revolution," in *Kino-Eye*, ed. Michelson, 14.
[44] Vertov, "Kinoks: A Revolution," in *Kino-Eye*, ed. Michelson, 18.

globe in lieu of actual physical travel. The effect of the kino-eye process on time is more intricate, and it is inherently tied to the issue of distance. For example, if a camera operator first films a landscape in one place, then travels a great distance to film a cityscape in another place with the intention of editing the two shots together, the audience will not only overcome the distance between the two settings, but the time it takes to travel that distance as well. The juxtaposition of images recorded in different places at different times is a crucial aspect of Soviet montage editing theory in general and the kino-eye process in particular.

Some might argue that the juxtaposition of film images through editing is in itself a manipulation of reality, yet Vertov does not seem to agree with such claims. It is important to note that while Vertov makes use of a variety of post-production techniques that may seem manipulative, he does not believe that these techniques undermine the ontological authenticity of the film images. According to Vertov, by arranging authentic film images in an order that differs from the way in which they appear to the human eye, he is not manipulating reality but rather attempting to show reality as it can be observed by the "more perfect" eye of the camera.

For example, a kinok may film the process of a piece of beef being prepared for sale and consumption—beginning with the cow led to slaughter and ending later with the actual eating of the cooked meat by a consumer—but have these events play out literally in reverse in the final film, like a videotape being rewound. This creates what Vertov refers to as the "negative of time."[45] The negative of time seems to be

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[45] Petric, 32.

utilized and encouraged by Vertov in order to shed light on the work that goes into a given product, as with the beef example, with the aforementioned goal of empowering Soviet factory workers. Though technically a manipulation, a method such as the negative of time is not equated by Vertov with the kind of theatrical manipulations that he believes obscure cinematic truth. The negative of time, or any alteration of film speed or temporal order, does not compromise the ontological authenticity within the separate frames (the alteration of film speed merely results in more or less frames), nor does it bend to the will of a script between the frames. These temporal techniques may ultimately serve an overall theme, such as the recognition of the factory workers' role in mass production, but they do not alter the truth of the film according to Vertov.

Regarding the sequential or temporal alteration of film, he writes, "Kino-eye is the possibility of seeing life in any temporal order or at any speed inaccessible to the human eye."[46] Note that Vertov seems to refer to alternate temporal orders and speeds not as the results of kino-eye techniques, but rather as pre-existing in real life beyond the range of the human eye. In this sense, kino-eye is again described as a tool used to plunge the depths of the visual phenomena that surround us.

The traversing of space and time through kino-eye with the goal of a more truthful representation of reality begins with the authenticity of the individual frames and ends with the organization of separate shots into a cohesive whole according to a theme. A kinok may film a long shot of a street in Kiev, and then another of an

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[46] Vertov, "From Kino-Eye to Radio-Eye," in *Kino-Eye*, ed. Michelson, 88.

assembly line in a factory, and these separate shots may be called truthful. However, Vertov, again recalling the metaphor of filmmaker as builder, has a greater end result in mind, declaring, "…it is not enough just to film bits of truth. These bits must be organized in order to produce a truth of the whole. And this task is no less difficult, perhaps even more difficult, than the filming of the individual bits of truth."[47] Ideally, the kinok camera operators gather images separated by distance and time, and the kinok editors assemble these separate images, constructing a representation of reality that could not be assembled by the human eye on its own.

In this way, kino-eye produces a "whole" that is, according to Vertov, more truthful than the entirety of the images that can be captured and perceived by the human eye alone. However, to fully understand the role of the editor in the process of creating cinematic truth, we must recognize Vertov's own distinction between truth and cinematic truth with respect to the notion of a film being constructed from individual pieces into a whole. Petric writes, "Vertov draws the distinction between 'life facts' and 'film facts' on the ontological level in that a 'film fact' in the documentary cinema has no validity if it fails, per se, to preserve its truthfulness to the reality from which it comes."[48] In other words, a film fact is only valid if it authentically represents the real happening (or "life fact") which it corresponds to, and the editing of the individual film facts into a whole is meant to present a truthfulness that goes beyond the life facts from which the film originated.

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[47] Vertov, "I Wish to Share My Experience," in *Kino-Eye*, ed. Michelson, 120.
[48] Petric, 38.

In his book <u>Constructivism in Film</u>, Petric analyzes the technical aspects of *The Man with the Movie Camera* and defends Vertov's approach to filmmaking. He offers his own interpretation of Vertov's view of cinematic truth:

> [Kino-eye] employed all available cinematic devices to recreate a new visual structure (the 'film-thing'), not only phenomenologically different from its prototype but far more revealing than reality itself. On the basis of these precepts, one can conclude that Vertov's concept of truth—however concerned with 'life caught unawares'—is not identical with objective truth, not even with truth as it is initially recorded on the celluloid strip.[49]

Petric's interpretation lead him to categorize Vertov as a "constructivist." The filmmaker Sergei Yutkevich attributes the following slogan to the constructivist cinema movement: "THROUGH THE DISCOVERY OF RAW MATERIAL TOWARDS A NEW OBJECT."[50] This constructivist principle informs Vertov's ideas of kino-eye truth. For the kinoks, the "raw material" of which Yutkevich speaks are the truthful "life facts" recorded by the camera operators, which are then used by editors to create a new object, a new truth constructed from the raw material of recorded life facts.

The classification of Vertov as a "constructivist" recalls Hegel's <u>Reason in History</u>. Hegel claims that there are three methods of writing history: original, reflective and philosophical. Of the philosophical writing of history, he explains that philosophy shapes the brute facts of history according to ideas that exist in the philosophy independent of the brute facts of history.[51] If we take the raw "life facts" of which Vertov speaks as the brute facts of history, and the Communist ideology as

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[49] Vlada Petric, *Constructivism in Film* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 4.

[50] Sergei Yutkevich, "Eccentrism - Painting - Advertising," in *The Film Factory*, ed. Taylor and Christie, 63.

[51] G.W.F. Hegel, *Reason in History* (1837; reprint, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1953), 10.

the philosophy, then it could be said that the kino-eye method amounts to a kind of philosophical writing of history through cinema. Vertov believes that the ordering of brute facts according to the Communist ideology is the only way to achieve genuine truth in cinema.   For Vertov, then, there is actually little distinction between cinematic truth and truth in general. The kino-eye philosophy is based on the idea that truth can only be achieved through cinema. Petric writes, "Vertov wanted the screen image of man to be truthful to his prototype in reality on an ontological level, while the new version of man (different from that existing in reality) had to be conceived on the structural level."[52] Vertov presented this "new vision" as the truth unknowable by human eyes without the aid of a camera, and the conception of the new vision (the genuine truth through cinema) was wholly dependent on the Communist ideology.

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[52] Petric, 37.

Chapter 3: Nelson Goodman and Werner Herzog

Dziga Vertov's basic method of creating what he would call a truthful film is clear: arranging brute facts into a cohesive whole according to the Communist ideology. However, we must acknowledge that what passes for truthful content in such a film is at the very least contingent on the decisions made by the filmmaker during both the filming and editing stages. The kino-eye process, like any filmmaking process, is one of preference and selection. A camera operator filming a given setting must choose what to include inside the space of the frame. Later, an editor must select specific shots which, when combined in a certain order, will communicate the theme of the film. The theme is determined by the creator of the film according to a preference. In the case of the kinoks, the preference of theme was often based on a Communist worldview. Naturally in this process, an infinite number of possible themes are left unaddressed, the editor leaves certain shots "on the cutting room floor," and the camera operator must choose what to leave out of the frame just by virtue of deciding what to capture within it. The question now becomes how a process which is as much about exclusion as it is about inclusion can yield results that can be called truthful, and by what criteria they should be labeled as such.

The American philosopher Nelson Goodman provides a unique account of truth that allows us to put Vertov's ideas of cinematic truth into perspective. Much of Goodman's work analyzes the ways in which we perceive, interpret and describe our surroundings and our experiences. His ideas of truth stem from his theory of

worldmaking, which says that human beings "are confined to ways of describing whatever is described. Our universe, so to speak, consists of these ways rather than of a world or of worlds."[53] In its most simple form, the theory of worldmaking claims that there is no single representational schema which we all share, but rather there are many different systems of seeing, understanding and relating information. These various systems, referred to by Goodman as "world-versions," may (and often do) overlap, but he describes them as existing separately nonetheless. Goodman claims that "many different world-versions are of independent interest and importance, without any requirement or presumption of reducibility to a single base."[54] In other words, the world or worlds which we inhabit are constituted by our efforts to understand and describe them, and because we are limited to our systems of understanding and description there is no evidence to support the view that a single world lies behind these systems of description. Goodman writes:

> While we may speak of determining what versions are right as "learning about the world", "the world" supposedly being that which all right versions describe, all we learn about the world is contained in right versions of it; and while the underlying world, bereft of these, need not be denied to those who love it, it is perhaps on the whole a world well lost.[55]

For Goodman, then, the search for a single objective world against which to measure claims of truthfulness and falsity is fruitless and irrelevant because there are many world-versions existing independently of each other. If there are many different world-versions, none dependent on a single underlying world, then each

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[53] Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1978), 3.
[54] Goodman, *WW*, 4.
[55] Goodman, *WW*, 4.

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version has its own criteria for truth. Goodman writes that "truth cannot be defined or tested by agreement with 'the world'; for not only do truths differ for different worlds, but the nature of agreement between a version and a world apart from it is notoriously nebulous."[56] If Goodman's theory of worldmaking and his approach to truth are taken to be accurate, then a key problem in Vertov's approach to cinematic truth becomes clear. Vertov's entire cinematic enterprise was based on the assumption of a single world, one which only Vertov seemed to know how to represent. He assumes a single world from which his camera pulls objective "film-facts," and then through the process of editing, he exhibits this single world in a way that is allegedly more accurate and truthful than the world we see through our own human perceptions. Not only does the kino-eye approach to truth require and presume the reducibility of multiple world-versions to a single base, but it requires that single base to be informed by a specific political outlook, namely "a kind of *Communist decoding of reality*"[57] that guides every aspect of a kino-eye production. Therefore, the overall truthfulness of Vertov's films is dependent on a specific way of understanding that must be shared by any and all members of the audience.

The degree to which a film image represents reality, therefore, may depend more heavily on the epistemological habits of each viewer than Vertov acknowledges. Goodman's work, taken in the most simplistic way, suggests that everyone has a different way of seeing and interpreting his or her surroundings. Though these various ways of seeing often have much in common, that might be because, as

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[56] Goodman, *WW*, 17.
[57] Michelson, xxx.

Goodman says, "seeing is an activity and the way we perform it depends in large part upon our training."[58] In order to claim that his camera records objective "life facts," Vertov must deny the possibility that there would be any variation in the way in which the subjects of his raw footage are seen and perceived. He is assuming a standard system of representation, and the truthfulness of this particular stage of his filmmaking process is dependent on the existence of such a standard system in much the same way that the overall truthfulness depends on a single representational schema based on Communism. Furthermore, in terms of truthful representations, Goodman rejects the idea that "the way we see the world best, the most pictorial approach to the way the world is, is the way the camera sees it."[59] He does so on the grounds that the camera, when used from different angles, can produce pictures that appear distorted. For example, Goodman writes, "if I take a photograph of a man with his feet towards me, the feet may come out as large as his torso."[60] Such a photograph would not be representative of the way the man is actually proportioned.

But rather than dismiss the visual variations of perspective that can be exemplified in photography as mere distortions, Goodman holds up such variations as examples of different ways of seeing and perceiving. On the subject of a "distorted" photograph, Goodman writes, "just in the way that it differs from an ordinary 'realistic' picture, it reveals new facts and possibilities in visual experience."[61] Here is a view that is very similar to Vertov's outlook in some respects. Vertov and

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[58] Nelson Goodman, *Problems and Projects* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1972), 28.
[59] Goodman, *PP*, 27.
[60] Goodman, *PP*, 27.
[61] Goodman, PP, 28.

Goodman both seem to acknowledge that the camera can be used to reveal ways of seeing that differ from human beings' usual perceptions. The difference, however, is that Goodman presents the variations revealed by the camera as evidence of multiple world-versions, while Vertov might claim that these variations are pieces of a single world, one that can only be fully perceived once the images supplied by the camera are edited into a cohesive whole. Goodman's view regarding such variations of representation and description further clarifies his approach to truth. He writes:

> There are very many different equally true descriptions of the world, and their truth is the only standard of their faithfulness. And when we say of them that they all involve conventionalizations, we are saying that no one of these different descriptions is *exclusively* true, since the others are also true. None of them tells us *the* way the world is, but each tells us *a* way the world is.[62]

Goodman seems to suggest that to tell *the* way the world is is the goal of science, while to tell *a* way the world is is the goal of art. From his initial example of visual variations in photography, Goodman continues to the subject of painting, suggesting that different styles of painting are indicative of different ways of seeing and interpreting. Goodman does not seem to support the goal of science to show *the* way the world is, declaring, "the scientist who supposes that he is single-mindedly dedicated to the search for truth deceives himself."[63] He does not completely reject the methodology of science, but Goodman does appear to suggest that the pluralistic nature of art provides a more fitting approach to the concept of truth. Vertov, however, seems to have embarked on the single-minded search for truth that

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[62] Goodman, *PP*, 30.
[63] Goodman, *WW*, 18.

Goodman associates with science. Vertov believes that through the process of kino-eye, cinema can and should show *the* way the world is.

If Goodman's views are taken to be accurate, then it could be said that the kino-eye films are truthful only to the extent that they adhere to the one single way of seeing and understanding shared by Vertov. Goodman might have said of Vertov's films that they reveal only one truthful account among many. However, Vertov would not be content with the achievement of providing *a* truthful account. The kino-eye philosophy claims that there is only one truthful account of the world and it can only be exhibited through cinema. The contemporary filmmaker Werner Herzog offers an approach to cinematic truth that would be more compatible with Goodman's pluralist theory.

Born in a Bavarian village in 1942, Herzog has been making fiction and non-fiction films since the age of twenty. He would probably not appreciate this categorization of his films since he questions the distinction between documentary and fictional cinema, declaring, "my what you call 'documentaries' were largely scripted, rehearsed, and repeated, and have a lot of fantasy and concoction in them."[64] For Vertov, truth is portrayed by showing facts--"life-facts" as represented by "film-facts"--which are used to build a truthful film. Although Herzog does not speak specifically of Vertov or Goodman, he rejects the notion that facts constitute truth in

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[64] Keith Phipps, *Interviews: Werner Herzog* (The Onion AV Club, 2003, accessed 20 July 2007); available from http://www.avclub.com/content/node/22531; Internet.

cinema, declaring: "Facts create norms, truth creates illumination."[65]   Although

Herzog does not reference Goodman or the theory of worldmaking, the idea of facts

creating norms seems related to Goodman's philosophy.   It could be said, in

Goodman's terms, that the "norms" of which Herzog speaks represent the single-

world-based truth pursued by science, while the "illumination" represents the more

abstract truths pursued by art.   The former is dependent on facts, while the latter, for

which Herzog strives, invites a variety of criteria for truth.

Herzog's rejection of a dependence on facts allows him to insert certain

elements into his non-fiction films that Vertov might call theatrical.   For example,

Herzog's non-fiction films may contain scenes that are rehearsed or sometimes

completely fabricated.   These elements may not be truthful in the Vertovian sense,

but they might contribute to the kind of cinematic truth sought by Herzog.   In various

interviews, Herzog speaks of an "ecstatic truth," that can be achieved through cinema.

The phrase was coined by Herzog in 1999 in the Minnesota Declaration, a short

document that begins as an explanation of this view of cinematic truth and ends as a

light parody of the kind of passionate manifestos set forth by figures such as Vertov.

Point number five of the Minnesota Declaration offers a concise account of ecstatic

truth: "There are deeper strata of truth in cinema, and there is such a thing as poetic,

ecstatic truth.   It is mysterious and elusive, and can be reached only through

fabrication and imagination and stylization."[66]   In this sense, whether a Herzog film

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[65] Werner Herzog, *Minnesota Declaration* (Werner Herzog Official Website, 1999, accessed 27 July 2007); available from http://www.wernerherzog.com/main/de/html/news/Minnesota_Declaration.htm; Internet.
[66] Herzog, *Minnesota Declaration*.

achieves truthfulness depends heavily upon the mindset of the viewer. Nowhere does Herzog require the "illumination" of all viewers as a criterion for whether his films have achieved truth, in much the same way that a poem does not require everyone who reads it to connect with it.

Herzog's approach to cinematic truth is similar to Goodman's view of truth in general in the sense that neither seems to be dependent on a single representational schema to be shared by everyone. In light of Goodman's philosophy, Herzog's ecstatic truth seems more appropriate than Vertov's kino-eye truth because it seems to take into account the possibility of various systems of knowing and understanding. The ecstatic truth does not require a single base against which to be tested. We can better see what Herzog's approach is like by turning to one of Herzog's non-fiction films, *Little Dieter Needs to Fly*. It challenges traditional definitions of fact and fiction in cinema by blending the testimony of real events by its titular subject with obviously staged recreations of these events.

The German-born Dieter Dengler was a pilot in the United States Air Force who was shot down over Laos in February, 1966 and held captive with several other Asian and American soldiers by the Pathet Laos army until their escape in June. Herzog's 1997 film allows Dengler himself, who later died in 2001, to guide viewers through a chronological tour of his life, specifically concentrating on his time in Laos. Herzog narrates off-screen, but Dengler is visually present throughout the film, often speaking directly to the camera. His description of his childhood in war-torn Germany is accompanied by still photos and archival footage, but as we will see in

what follows, the section of the film that focuses on Dengler's time as a prisoner of war is unusual.

Herzog, Dengler and the crew returned to Laos to film in some of the same locations where the pilot's story occurred. Additionally, local actors were hired to portray the Pathet Laotian soldiers who held Dengler and the others captive. In these scenes, Dengler is still speaking to the camera, describing his experiences, but he is doing so in nearly the same geographic setting, while actors dressed as his captors bind his hands and usher him through the jungle with guns.[67] Such dramatized elements raise questions about the criteria by which this particular film could be called truthful. It is true that Dengler was held hostage in Laos in 1966. It is not true that the men on screen with Dengler in the film were holding him hostage at the time of the filming, but it is true that such captivity did take place as Dengler describes it and the actors attempt to portray it. It could be argued that such a story like that of Dengler could not have been produced through the kino-eye method. Hypothetically, the kinoks would have been restricted to relating Denger's past experience though whatever archival footage or photographs were available. Even if such a film could be compiled according to the kino-eye method, it would not likely be as engaging as Herzog's film.

Further confounding the categorization of *Little Dieter Needs to Fly* is the fact that it was originally conceived, according to Herzog, as a narrative fictional film and later realized as such by Herzog himself. *Rescue Dawn* (2006) is a fictional film

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[67] Werner Herzog and others. <u>Little Dieter Needs to Fly</u>. 1997. 1 DVD (74 min.) video recording. Anchor Bay, 2003.

based on the story of Dengler, who is portrayed in the film by the actor Christian Bale.[68]   Vertov would find both *Little Dieter Needs to Fly* and *Rescue Dawn* problematic, since the former is a documentary that incorporates theatrical elements (actors, staged scenes), and the latter presents a historical happening through the drama of staged recreation by actors according to a script.   If a kind of truth is achieved by either film, it is the ecstatic, illuminating truth described by Herzog. However, the tagline of *Rescue Dawn*, "Experience The Incredible True Story Of One Man's Fight For Freedom," fails to specify what kind of truth the film has attempted in the first place.

The factual discrepancies of *Rescue Dawn* invoked a negative response from the family of one of the American soldiers portrayed in the film.   The website "Rescue Dawn: The Truth," organized by the family and friends of one of Dengler's fellow prisoners of war, Eugene DeBruin, criticizes *Rescue Dawn* for its allegedly inaccurate portrayal of the other prisoners and the events of their escape.   The organizers of the website acknowledge the courage of all of the prisoners involved, but claim that *Rescue Dawn* exaggerates Dengler's contributions to the escape effort and portrays DeBruin as a particularly unlikable and delusional character.   The website presents a film-to-real life textual comparison, and declares that "the truth clearly doesn't matter to Werner Herzog."[69]   Herzog claims to have based the characters in *Rescue Dawn* on Dengler's personal accounts, but the website also

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[68] Werner Herzog and others. <u>Rescue Dawn</u>. 2006. 1 DVD (125 min.) video recording. MGM Home Entertainment, 2007.

[69] Jerry DeBruin, *A Family Member's Critique of Werner Herzog's "Rescue Dawn"* (Rescue Dawn: The Truth, 2007, accessed 20 November 2007); available from http://www.rescuedawnthetruth.com/; Internet.

presents a video interview, in which Dengler discusses DeBruin, that does not match with the way DeBruin is portrayed in *Rescue Dawn*. Herzog addressed the issue while promoting the DVD release of *Rescue Dawn* in November 2007:

> It's a basic problem about storytelling. Yes, if I had known every single one of the prisoners intimately, and had gotten each of their stories, I probably would have ended up with five different variations of the story. [...] Yes, someone may be unhappy with how one character is portrayed. You run into that, and it's fine. And it's absolutely legitimate that they raise their voices and explain that they see it differently.[70]

The organizers of the website may be justifiably offended by the way in which certain events and persons are depicted in *Rescue Dawn*, and their argument against Herzog's film is evidence of the continuous conflict between different definitions of cinematic truth.

Herzog's ecstatic truth seems to be analogous to the kind of truth Goodman believes is the goal of art. Goodman writes, "in a scientific treatise, literal truth counts most; but in a poem or a novel, metaphorical or allegorical truth may matter more."[71] Goodman's distinction between literal and metaphorical truth is complicated, relating to his theories regarding verbal statements, but the essential difference seems to be that literal truth depends on facts while metaphorical truth does not. Neither is Herzog's ecstatic truth fact-based, and it is interesting how both men use the example of poetry to communicate their respective ideas of truth.

Goodman might say that Vertov's films, in their fruitless pursuit of a literal scientific truth, should instead be viewed as fine examples of metaphorical truth or

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[70] Rich Cline, *Werner Herzog on Rescue Dawn: The RT Interview* (Rotten Tomatoes, 2007, accessed 21 April 2008); available from http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/rescue_dawn/news/1689315/2.php; Internet.

[71] Goodman, *WW*, 18.

the kind of truth achieved through art. If Goodman's views are taken to be right, then perhaps despite their efforts to show *the* way the world is, kino-eye films almost certainly show *a* way the world is. However, Vertov would not likely be content with such an achievement. His unyielding desire to present a new reality through cinema invites commentary on the ambitions of the non-fiction filmmaker.

Chapter 4: *Real Life* and the Fate of Kino-Eye

The struggle for literal truth in non-fiction cinema is exemplified by Albert Brooks's 1979 film *Real Life*. Brooks uses a documentary approach to make a fictional film that directly parodies the PBS television series *An American Family*. Produced in 1971, *An American Family* was an attempt to document the lives of the Loud family of Santa Barbara, California without interference from the filmmakers. *Real Life*, which would be referred to today as a "mockumentary," is the story of Albert Brooks, a fictionalized caricature of the comedian/filmmaker (played by himself), and his attempt to produce a similar non-fiction project about the fictional Yeager family of Phoenix, Arizona.[72] After acknowledging *An American Family*, text at the beginning of *Real Life* declares, "The motion picture you are about to see is the next step. It documents not only the life of a real family, but of the real people who came to film that family, and the effect they had on each other."[73] Although the claim is made to appear serious, the film's comedic nature becomes apparent in the opening scene, in which Brooks is introduced at a town hall forum to the citizens of Phoenix's fifth district, where his film-within-the-film is to take place.

As Brooks proceeds to outline his plan to his audience in a cheerful but condescending manner, the central comedic conflict of the film is revealed. Brooks expresses a desire to make a film about reality, but his speech to the crowd makes it

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[72] I will refer to Albert Brooks, the co-writer and director of the film *Real Life*, as "Albert Brooks." I will refer to Albert Brooks, the character in the film, as "Brooks."
[73] Albert Brooks and others. 1979. <u>Real Life</u>. 1 DVD (98 min.) video recording. Paramount Home Video, 2001.

clear that he will be unable to adhere to any convention of authenticity due to his background in theatrical entertainment. Brooks alludes to a gap between theatrical cinema and real life, claiming that reality features "the most hilarious comedy, the most gripping drama, the most suspenseful disasters."[74] However, by showing that he is unable to even describe real life without using theatrical terms, his comments also point to a fundamental disconnect between reality and the character of Brooks himself. Ostensibly, Brooks seeks to create a project that could have come from the mind of Dziga Vertov, but subconsciously, his intentions are diluted by theatrical tendency.

Following the town hall scene is a sequence in which the Brooks character leads the viewers through a tour of the various psychological and technical departments that will contribute to the making of his film. One of the key technological elements highlighted in this sequence is the type of camera that will be used to film the Yeager family. Dubbed the Ettinauer 226-XL, the camera, which looks similar to an astronaut's helmet, is worn over the head of the operator. Brooks explains that the device "hears" with microphones on the side of the helmet where a human's ears are, and "sees" with a large lens located over the operator's face. The fictional Ettinauer represents, albeit comically, a physical realization of the synthesis between man and machine, an idea central to Vertov's kino-eye philosophy. Harvey O'Brien writes:

> Brooks the character's excited, patient introduction to this exclusive and
> expensive hardware makes a point of the fetishisation of such objects within

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[74] Brooks, Real Life.

documentary practice. The hereby affirmed biomechanical qualities of the camera also call to mind Vertov's theories of Kino-eye, where the perfection of the machine improves on the weaknesses of the flesh.[75]

The mobility of the Ettinuaer-wearing cameramen in *Real Life* also recalls the sequence in Vertov's *The Man with the Movie Camera* in which a camera on a tripod appears to rise and walk around like a human through the technique of stop-motion animation. Both cases visualize Vertov's dream of cameras as mobile as humans, and humans as perceptive as cameras. Brooks heralds the precision of such technology as insurance of the film's importance, suggesting that the project may make him eligible for a Nobel prize. He reminds the audience constantly of the various psychological and scientific organizations overseeing his project, and "science is used throughout the film as a guarantor of worthiness and as a signifier of authenticity."[76] Brooks believes the participation of multiple scientific experts, of whom he knows little beyond their professional titles, will instill his film with the kind of objective factuality inherent to scientific disciplines. This attempt by Brooks, though ill-informed, parallels Vertov's desire to equate the making of a non-fiction film with the accuracy and precision of machinery and technology in order to achieve a goal of literal truth.

Real Life parodies such a dependence on irrefutable science when, near the end of the film, Brooks angrily rejects the hypothesis by the scientific advisors that the presence of the cameras has had a subconscious psychological effect on the

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[75] Harvey O'Brien, "'That's Really the Title?': Deconstructing Deconstruction in [...] *Real Life*," in *Docufictions*, ed. Gary D. Rhodes and John Parris Springer (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2006), 200.
[76] O'Brien, "Deconstructing Deconstruction...," in *Docufictions*, ed. Rhodes and Springer, 199.

Yeager family. The psychologists claim that subtle but undeniable changes have taken place in the subjects, presenting specific footage as evidence that the filmmakers are "getting a false reality," meaning that the subjects are behaving differently than they would be had the cameras not been present.[77] Brooks immediately rejects the claim, opposing the input of the very scientific institutions which he praised at the start of the production.

The main difference between the quests by Vertov and Brooks for "reality" through film is the intention of the respective filmmakers. Vertov seeks to affect the ideology of the masses by using the kino-eye method to present what he views as a more authentic cinematic counterpoint to the theatrical, fictional films produced by the bourgeoisie. In the process, he hopes to cement the future of cinema as a purely visual international language devoid of artificiality. Brooks purports to seek similar cinematic innovation, but it is obvious for comedic purposes that his intentions derive from a thinly-veiled egotistical selfishness. Brooks's desire for capturing "reality" does not stem from the emergency of political revolution, but rather from the desperate drive for cinematic and sociological fame. Although it is unlikely that Vertov intentionally sought a similar position of celebrity amidst the Russian Revolution, his actions with respect to the Soviet filmmaking community involve an undeniable degree of self-promotion. The role of the director as a personal representative of his or her work is nearly unavoidable in the realm of non-fiction films, where there are usually no well-known actors to help ingratiate the public to

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[77] Brooks, Real Life.

the films' content. In some cases, documentary filmmakers will narrate or appear on-screen, becoming the makeshift stars of their own films. This kind of reflexivity in non-fiction cinema is foreshadowed by the cameraman Mikhail Kaufman's on-screen role in Vertov's *The Man with a Movie Camera*, though *Real Life* suggests that the appearance of filmmakers in their own films has often become a tool of vain self-promotion.

Unlike Vertov's film, *Real Life* is an entirely fictional story which makes use of documentary conventions only in its stylistic approach. But by presenting the Brooks character as a comically fictionalized version of the comedian's actual self, "the film invokes (and parodies) the self-inscriptive dimensions of autobiographical or performative documentary, and uses this as a means to address questions of intervention and the role played by the film maker in the film making process."[78] In other words, Albert Brooks's film uses a caricature of the self-promoting non-fiction filmmaker as the starting point for an examination of how "reality" is unavoidably influenced by any attempt to document it authentically. *Real Life* can be viewed as a satire not only of the documentary form, but specifically of the archetype of the Vertovian director who holds tightly to the basic principles and assumed ethical merits of non-fiction filmmaking. The film also examines the effects such an approach has on the subject(s) of the film, and the way in which the Vertovian philosophy gives rise to questions regarding the border between reality and fiction, between authenticity and artistic tendency.

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[78] O'Brien, "Deconstructing Deconstruction...," in *Docufictions*, ed. Rhodes and Springer, 201.

Brooks claims to be devoted to non-fiction, but he treats the Yeager family as if they are characters in a fictional narrative film, attempting to construct a character arc for the father (Brooks's "leading man") in particular. Although the temptation of theatrical drama in non-fiction filmmaking is taken to a comedic extreme in *Real Life*, the film demonstrates one of the main arguments brought against Vertov's work. Like many of Vertov's detractors, the theorist Viktor Shklovsky criticized the kino-eye films for their lack of plot, but he also challenged Vertov's assertion that in cinema, art is inversely proportional to authenticity. Referencing Vertov's methods directly, Shklovsky wrote that "even if we are able to 'catch life unawares' the very act of catching would nevertheless be artistically directed."[79] The degree to which artistic tendency will influence a non-fiction film is variable, but Shkolvsky's argument is simply that the influence is always present, and that a tendency towards art does not deny authenticity. *Real Life* illustrates Shklovsky's argument by depicting a filmmaker whose artistic inclination is constantly and comically on display throughout the production of his documentary film.

A similar comedic examination of the non-fiction filmmaking process is offered by Wes Anderson's film *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* (2004), in which Bill Murray portrays the titular character, a fictional surrogate of the oceanographer/filmmaker Jacques Cousteau. Zissou chronicles the ocean adventures of his team in a series of episodic documentaries that closely mirror the style of Cousteau's work. As the film progresses, we get a behind-the-scenes look at the

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[79] Viktor Shklovsky, "Sergei Eisenstein and 'Non-Played' Film," in *The Film Factory*, ed. Taylor and Christie, 161.

evolution of the films-within-the-film, from the recording of their soundtracks to the editing process. In both the production and post-production of his films, we see that Zissou is less strict about authenticity than Brooks is in *Real Life*. Before filming, he rehearses dialogue and actions which are meant to appear spontaneous. Furthermore, he views the arrival of a pilot, Ned (played by Owen Wilson), who may be his illegitimate son, as an opportunity to add a sentimental subplot to his latest film, eventually prompting the following exchange:

> **Ned:** You don't know me. You never wanted to know me. I'm just a character in your film.
> **Steve:** It's a documentary! It's all really happening!
> **Ned:** Well damn you for that.[80]

The argument between the two characters illustrates the ability of the documentary filmmaker to bend real life events to fit not a scripted scenario, but a general theme, in Vertov's terms. One of Zissou's themes may be the father-son relationship, and so the desire to represent such a theme influences not just the production of the film, but the lives of the people involved in the production. Zissou has a method of conjuring and rehearsing actions and scenes within his documentaries, a technique that would be derided by Vertov, but is used frequently by Werner Herzog. In an open letter to Herzog, the film critic Roger Ebert writes:

> Your documentary "Little Dieter Needs to Fly" begins with a real man, Dieter Dengler. […] As the film opens, we see him entering his house, and compulsively opening and closing windows and doors, to be sure he is not

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[80] Wes Anderson and others. 2004. <u>The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou</u>. 1 DVD (118 min.) video recording. Buena Vista Home Entertainment, 2005.

locked in. "That was my idea," you told me. "Dieter does not really do that. But it is how he feels."[81]

Herzog directs Dengler to do something he does not normally do in order to express an emotion which the filmmaker believes the subject actually feels, and to contribute to the film's overall theme of freedom from confinement. Vertov would be opposed to this technique because although he strives to present overarching themes in his films, he would likely view the addition of elements such as Dengler's habit and Zissou's scene rehearsals as dramatic fabrications which dilute the recording of "life as it exists." The addition of such dramatic elements into non-fiction film is one example of the many ways in which the subjects of a documentary can be affected by the act of making the film, whether or not the participants are aware of the impact. The presence of the camera exerts an acknowledged influence over Steve Zissou and his team, as opposed to the subconscious changes undergone by the Yeager family in *Real Life*.

By the end of their respective films, both Brooks and Steve Zissou undergo significant changes in their approaches to cinematic truth. Brooks's misguided attempt at a strict Vertovian authenticity implodes when the Yeager family asks to be let out of their contract, and the studio financing the project shuts down the production. Distraught, Brooks repents to a cameraman, admitting that he simply is not qualified to record reality because, he says, "I don't know anything about it!"[82] Of the Brooks character's subsequent mental breakdown, Daniel Green writes, "even

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[81] Roger Ebert, *A Letter to Werner Herzog: In Praise of Rapturous Truth* (rogerebert.com, 2007, accessed 1 December 2007); available from http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20071117/PEOPLE/71117002; Internet.
[82] Brooks, Real Life.

as he has come to acknowledge his own distance from the lives he is filming, his biggest problem all along has been the belief that reality could serve as the 'subject' of a film like his in the first place."[83] The Brooks character realizes this larger issue and sets fire to the Yeager household in a desperate recreation of the climactic burning-of-Atlanta-sequence in the film *Gone with the Wind*.

The destructive climax of *Real Life* is inevitable considering once again the comments made by the Brooks character at the beginning of the film. He instructs the citizens of Phoenix's fifth district to be themselves during the filming, not to "put on a show." "We don't want a show," Brooks says. "Well let me correct myself. We want the greatest show of all: life!"[84] Here the Brooks character reveals his inability to observe reality independent of the conventions of theatrical entertainment. The Ettinauer camera represents not only Vertov's philosophical desires, but also the way in which Brooks literally sees the world. He has been conditioned to perceive reality as a film, describing life itself as a "show." The collapse of his project allows the Brooks character to finally acknowledge his skewed perspective. By burning down the Yeagers' home, he attempts to salvage his film by abandoning the concept of reality-as-subject altogether and embracing theatrical action.

Zissou suffers from a skewed perspective similar to that of Brooks. He attempts to shape his life and the lives of those around him to fit the theatrical mold exhibited in his earlier, more successful adventure documentaries. In a way, Zissou

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[83] Daniel Green, "'We're getting a false reality here': Albert Brooks and the comic idea," *Film Criticism* Vol. 17, No. 1. (1992): 26-37.
[84] Brooks, <u>Real Life</u>.

has set a theatrical standard for himself and his actions are directed by a desire to meet that standard. Yet Zissou too eventually undergoes a change. Unlike Brooks, however, he begins to drift toward a more Vertovian method of capturing life as it occurs, even if the results are unflattering. After falling down a flight of stairs near the end of the film, Zissou is pleased to hear that the accident was recorded. He declares, "We'll give them the reality this time. A washed up old man with no friends [...] people laughing at him, feeling sorry for himself"[85] It is arguable whether the character will follow through on this decision to present more realistic work to the audience, but his initial compromise represents a burgeoning willingness in Zissou to remove the theatrical elements from his work, beginning with a more honest depiction of his own self, an event Vertov might have described as an unmasking.

Real Life and The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou show, through satire, how authenticity in non-fiction cinema can be compromised by the experience of filmmaking itself. These films illustrate the tension in non-fiction cinema between authenticity and artistic tendency. Brooks and Zissou are filmmakers who artistically direct nearly every aspect of their non-fiction films. The indulgence of such artistic tendencies would be derided by Vertov, but Real Life and The Life Aquatic present filmmaker characters who are so accustomed to viewing life itself as theatrics that any adherence in their work to the kind of realism sought by kino-eye would be impossible. Perhaps Brooks and Zissou represent the ways in which the dominance of theatrical films has influenced the documentary film community. Had the kino-eye

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[85] Anderson, The Life Aquatic

movement of non-fiction cinema succeeded in the way Vertov had hoped, modern day documentary filmmakers would not be as tempted by the idea of theatrical entertainment as Brooks and Zissou clearly are.

Real Life in particular not only illustrates the difficulty of producing an authentic non-fiction film within a theatrical industry, but also parallels the fate of Vertov's kino-eye. One of the events that leads to the downfall of Brooks's film is the loss of financial support from the studio. Following the Revolution, Vertov experienced a similar dilemma. He was unable to find financial or political support, as "the massive bureaucracy of the Stalinist regime was now entirely reproduced within the Soviet film industry."[86] All Soviet filmmakers were at the mercy of the new government, which dictated strictly which projects would be funded and exhibited. Vertov would never again enjoy the success brought by his most well-known films, those produced during the 1930s. Annette Michelson writes:

> Vertov was faced with increasing isolation, the constant rejection of plans and projects throughout the forties and fifties; his form and methods were criticized as irrelevant. […] As [Vertov] very clearly saw, he was now, with a stunning irony, subject to the same fixity of attribution of role and function that the revolutionary project had proposed to abolish.[87]

Elsewhere around the globe, theatrical film retained its commercial dominance over non-fiction as it does today. With the new film industry actively suppressing his proposals, Vertov, like the beleaguered Brooks from *Real Life*, turned to the lure of fiction, investing time in projects that strayed from the initial dictums of kino-eye. He wrote outlines for fictional films that would never be produced,

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[86] Michelson, lx.
[87] Michelson, lx.

including several science fiction stories. One of Vertov's never-realized projects, which was tentatively titled *The Girl at the Piano*, was described by Vertov as "musical and poetic, and at the same time instructive. An epic of science fiction, without using a magician or talisman."[88] The outline for the film was labeled by Vertov "DRAFT FOR A SCENARIO." That Vertov would engage himself in the drafting of scenarios for fictional films is in direct contrast to the anti-scenario, anti-script practices of kino-eye. The outline for *The Girl at the Piano* reads like prose literature.

In one way, the path of Vertov's career could be viewed as a resurgence of creative tendencies not exercised by Vertov since his pre-revolution days as a young student of poetry and literary fiction. However, in a wider context, the late-period shift in Vertov's career may represent a turning point in film history. As a pioneer of non-fiction cinema begins to experiment with more theatrical material in the late 1930s and early 1940s, the so-called Golden Age of Hollywood begins in the United States, kino-eye techniques are adapted into fiction by the emerging neorealist and new wave movements in Europe, and the kino-eye movement gives way to new approaches to cinematic truth.

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[88] Vertov, "The Girl at the Piano," in *Kino-Eye*, ed. Michelson, 299.

Conclusion

Although Vertov's kino-eye movement did not last after the Russian Revolution, it remains a fine starting point for the study of non-fiction film theory. Contemporary filmmakers offer a variety of approaches to truth in non-fiction cinema, some of which echo aspects of the kino-eye philosophy. The director Errol Morris, whose 1988 film *The Thin Blue Line* famously set in motion the exoneration of a man wrongly convicted of murder, uses dramatic elements such as reenactments in some of his films, but he has also developed a technique that strongly recalls kino-eye. When conducting interviews for his films, Morris occasionally uses a system called the Interrotron, which projects the interviewer's face on to the lens of the camera pointing to the subject and vice versa. This process allows for the interviewer and the subject to speak directly to each other, and the final result in the film is an image of the subject speaking directly to the audience. Morris describes the process:

> The Interrotron was a way of doing a lot of different things at once. It removes me from the area around the camera. Instead, there's just a half silvered mirror, an image of me floating in front of the lens. It allows for direct eye contact with me, and out at the audience at the same time. Which I don't think has ever existed before.[89]

The act of imposing an image of the interviewer's face over the lens recalls Vertov's desire to anthropomorphize the camera. The Interrotron gives the camera a human quality and also mechanizes the image of the human interviewer through its connection to the lens.

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[89] Keith Phipps. *Interviews: Errol Morris.* (The Onion AV Club, 1997, accessed 3 March 2008); available from http://www.avclub.com/content/node/23263; Internet.

Contemporary non-fiction filmmakers such as Morris and Trinh T. Minh-Ha have their own approaches to cinematic truth and they are more likely to acknowledge that the concept of truth in cinema is dense and complicated. Morris declares, "Truth exists independent of style. It involves all kinds of issues. Properly considered, it's a quest, a pursuit."[90] Minh-Ha makes experimental non-fiction, often about her native Vietnam, and offers the following assessment of the history of documentary film theory: "In film, such a [documentary] tradition [...] is likely to fortify itself through its very recurrence of declines and rebirths."[91] Both filmmakers seem to describe non-fiction film cinema as undergoing constant movement and change, with Morris in particular calling cinematic truth "a pursuit."

It is my opinion that Vertov, with his kino-eye philosophy, served as the catalyst for the continuous changes in the concept of truth in non-fiction. However, his ideas and his films are so deeply rooted in the context of the Russian Revolution that they do not resonate in the way Vertov might have hoped they would. Vertov's films are visually fascinating but sometimes thematically inaccessible, and his theories are problematic. I do not know whether Nelson Goodman's theory of worldmaking is right, but I do believe that it is right for cinema. The idea of a pluralist outlook that acknowledges a variety of systems of understanding and perception seems to fit well with the nature of film. In this sense, Goodman's philosophy, when viewed in relation to film theory, helps us better understand why

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[90] Noel Murray. *Interviews: Errol Morris.* (The Onion AV Club, 2005, accessed 3 March 2008); available from http://www.avclub.com/content/node/40555/; Internet.
[91] Trinh T. Minh-Ha. *When the Moon Waxes Red.* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 29.

Vertov's approach to truth does not resonate in the modern international film community. If you take Goodman's outlook to be harmonious with cinema, then you might agree that Werner Herzog offers a better fitting approach to cinematic truth. However, the *Rescue Dawn* controversy shows that Herzog's ecstatic truth can also be problematic, in that Herzog may produce films that are seen as truthful to some but not truthful to others.

I believe that it is fruitless to judge whether a certain approach to cinematic truth is right or wrong. If we were somehow able to pin down a single and specific definition of cinematic truth, then any filmmaker with the goal of truth would have to work within the confines of that definition. By acknowledging that there are many different approaches to cinematic truth (some harmonious, some conflicting), we in turn are treated to a wide variety of films. As an audience member, I want the widest variety of films, fiction and non-fiction, available to me as possible. To limit the definition of cinematic truth would limit the filmmakers as well.

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