

## *Ciné-Eye* and its Future



Not like Pathé.  
Not like Gaumont.  
Not how they see,  
Not as they want.  
Be Newton  
to see  
an apple.  
Give people eyes  
To see a dog  
With  
Pavlov's  
eye.  
Is cinema CINEMA?  
*We blow up* cinema,  
For  
CINEMA  
to be seen.

Dziga Vertov 1917 – “Start”  
The Laboratory of Hearing, RGALI 2091-2-226;  
in Tsivian 2004: 35)

Photo: in Michelson © 1984 *Kino-Eye*

Camera is a medium of and for perception. It is an ideal eye as Dziga Vertov said and a participating tool as Robert Flaherty showed it. An ‘all-seeing eye’, as revealed through these descriptions, brings us into a filmic trance created by a cameraman through the lens, by camera settings, and by the light which exposes the emulsion on a film. We suddenly sense that we perceive more than we are capable with our biological eye. We are mentally and emotionally transported into a story, which – as many people would argue – is never as real

as 'reality'. Film rather seems to be a rich metaphor enabling us to identify ourselves within reality or to construct our reality around it. It seems to be a mechanical or digital footprint of self-realization. Besides seeing and hearing, however, we also touch, smell, and taste the world. Human beings are predisposed to live in everlasting search for the balance between these senses and the Western World began to pose questions about sensory experience already very early. In the last century and especially in the last few decades the first two ways of perceiving the world – seeing and hearing – became somehow privileged; they became bombarded by images and voices affecting the whole sensory apparatus. So we could say that the production of visual images – just as the production of sounds from ever more sophisticated auditory devices – came into our lives as an explosion, in which science and art coexist in a dialogue and together participate in transmission of information. A short history of film, within a much longer history of the humans, goes hand in hand with technological progress. In the digital era we move dimensions of our senses to virtual perception. The overwhelming production and the speed of audio and visual media – often replacing previously dominating textual ones – significantly reduce the time for reflection. In this short essay I would like to reflect briefly on the notions of seeing, memorizing, creating and sharing through the camera-eye.

“Our eye sees very badly and very little. And so people invented the microscope, in order to see invisible phenomena. And so people invented the telescope, in order to see and study distant unknown worlds. And so people invented the movie camera, in order to penetrate more deeply into the seen world, in order to study and note down visual phenomena, in order not to forget what is happening and what it will be essential to take into account in future” (Vertov 1924, RGALI 2091-2-193; in Tsivian 2004: 99,102). Russian cinematographic thinker Dziga Vertov and Irish-American geologist Robert Flaherty were two pioneers who developed techniques of direct cinema and documentary filmmaking already in 1920s. In the time when sound was already waiting to be added to the film, these two men were experimenting with the cinema in real life. Contrary to a fiction film based on a script, the direct cinema was about immediate interaction between a filmmaker and the filmed people. Dziga Vertov talked about *kinopravda* which designates not the 'pure truth' but a particular truth of the recorded images (*ciné-eye*) and sounds, so called filmic truth (*Life Caught Unawares* or *Kinoglaz*). By following non-acted cinema, by showing enthusiasm for the facts of life, and by adding the sound, he introduced *radio-eye* (*The Man with a Movie Camera* or *One Sixth of the World*). Robert Flaherty's empirical technique allowed the Eskimos, Nanook and his family, to participate in his film (*Nanook of the North*). Here the camera-eye was literally participating in everyday life of the Inuit people. “I am not going to make films about what the white man has made of primitive peoples ... What I want to show is the former

majesty and character of these people ... my admiration for them” (Barnouw 1974: 45, in Ruby 2000: 89). In every stage of the direct cinema, the filmic attitude manifested itself. Without knowing it, Vertov – a futurist poet – was doing sociology, while Flaherty – a geologist-explorer – was doing ethnography. Following the filmic process they both started a genre of documentary filmmaking. Although these two men never met, they were nevertheless both representing 'cinema reality'. In their creative works we observe human lives and their social dramas. For Vertov *ciné-eye* meant a camera which did not lie. It did not hide but show all the images, methods and techniques; it was a kind of theory manifestation on the screen. The 'truth' was thematic where the fragments on the screen were not partial but existed in the form of an organic collective (*Kinok Manifesto*). Contrary to Vertov's revolutionary documentary manifestations, Flaherty as a one-man-team, by portraying the everydayness and the life style of a family, produced an epic-style narrative film, the base for the future of ethnographic filmmaking. “Perhaps it was due to such simplicity and naïveté that these pioneers discovered the essential questions that we still ask ourselves today: Must one 'stage' reality (the staging of 'real life') as did Flaherty, or should one, like Vertov, film 'without awareness' ('seizing improvised life')?” (Rouch in Feld 2003: 33).

### **Sharing the ideas**

This short introductory history of camera-eye brings us into 1960s and to the French anthropologist-filmmaker Jean Rouch. This man was capable of connecting the ideas of Dziga Vertov and Robert Flaherty and of moving further in his film technique towards *shared anthropology*. A film style *cinéma-vérité* derives from *Kinopravda* ('cinema truth'). Rouch saw the camera as an important tool that played a catalytic role in the film process. Participation and provocation of a cameraman bring into being words and situations which would otherwise be unsaid or unseen (*Chronicle of a Summer*). He argued that ethnographic cinema can be liberating because of its capacity to intimately project the richness of local sensibilities and realities. The audio-visual research method which was deepened by Jean Rouch contains three main points. First, there is feedback or audio-visual reciprocity where contrary to the written anthropological accounts one has ability to share the analyses with those who played the major part in the film. Second, there is the notion of a fieldwork conceptualized as *ethnologue*. “I now believe that for the people who are filmed, the 'self' of the filmmaker changes in front of their eyes during the shooting ... It is a strange kind of choreography, which, if inspired, makes the cameraman and soundman no longer invisible but participants in the ongoing event” (Rouch in Feld 2003: 99). The third point in his method was his collaborative style, such as, for example, his filmic relationship with his Nigerian friends (*Jaguar*). There is no space at this point to enter a debate around the influence of

montage or synchronized sound. My aim is to remain on the track which deals with interactions between a cameraman and the filmed people. All three men – Vertov, Flaherty and Rouch – developed their film techniques in order to portray the lives of actual people in their own environments.

Today's digital technology offers many more options for interaction in recording process and sharing of the audio-visual recordings with both the filmed people and the spectators. Light weight digital cameras are easier to obtain, carry and use in the field. The possibilities to watch documentary or ethnographic films opened up. At the same time the amount of produced films, the flow of digital data, the rising technical quality and their availability shift the values of these re-presentations. *Ciné-eye* somehow lost its status of an ideal eye and moved from the cinema halls to the private screening places. World Wide Web enables a film to be transported from one side of the world to another. To produce a documentary seems nothing special, and there are plenty of invisible camera-eyes showing 'realities' of life. The cinema and places for renting films lost their social role of earlier times. The films moved into private collections or museums. This, of course, does not mean that the art that used to be embodied in the film has died. Due to new technological advantages we have easier access to many works that were previously inaccessible. Nevertheless, many films are somehow still hidden and beyond the reach of us, spectators, as well as the film critics and other filmmakers. Some of the films were misused and misunderstood. In this context museums played and should play an important role (see Horwath 2005, for example). Among the museums one can distinguish between internal collections (not for public), places for projections (special events), and art museums (a particular collection of films available to public). All these ways of storage keep different ways of visual documentation alive. However, we can nowadays see many more experimental films than documentaries or ethnographic films on the shelves of these museums. Several times I personally encountered a problem when I wanted to obtain a particular film that was made by Vertov, Flaherty or Rouch. In spite of the audio-visual flow and multiple sources, there are inconceivable gaps when one can hardly find a proper source, a transmitter of a great work. Here I would place an emphasis on museums, which could be more resourceful and could provide all interested individuals with significant films from the past. In his article, Alexander Horwath writes: "The museum is a critical, ethical, and political tool ... [it] is also a space in which one can find respect. Respect both for the artefacts that are collected, preserved, and exhibited, and for the person who views them in order to engage with them. The museum collection, finally, is not an image-bank created by chance, but an active and poetic process, which should be presented just as actively and poetically" (Horwath 2005: 7). A museum should be more than just an archive. Through collections of the avant-garde, through retrospectives, and by showing the works which would otherwise not be seen – and by being able to provide them

for interested customers – they could expand their role of bringing the past into the present. In some ways, they could become an extension of a camera-eye.

The importance of connection – and transmission – between a camera-eye, human existence, and the viewers is without doubt still present. Documentary and ethnographic movies are crucial for sharing of memories, eras and ideas which are inseparable parts of human lives. In regard to the constitution of an ethnographer's 'self' Jean Rouch writes: "In the field, the observer modifies himself; in doing his work, he is no longer simply someone who greets the elders at the edge of the village, but – to go back to Vertovian terminology – he ethno-looks, ethno-observes, ethno-thinks. And those with whom he deals are similarly modified; in giving their confidence to this habitual foreign visitor; they ethno-show, ethno-speak, ethno-think" (Rouch in Feld 2003: 100). I wish that *shared anthropology* would get more space in the world of film generally in order to transmit both its values and the values of the people. With the help of a museum as one of the most relevant institutions for its preservation I believe that this could be done.

#### **References:**

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