

# Kino-Cock: The Virility Of The Man With A Movie Camera, A Metastudy

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A sexy reading of Dziga Vertov's *Man With A Movie Camera* in which the author explores the parallels between the camera eye of the film and the male sex organ.

Author's note: I have chosen to insert youtube clips throughout my analysis—this is, after all, an online journal. *Man With A Movie Camera* has appeared with several different musical scores in recent decades. I have chosen the Cinematic Orchestra version. The reader/viewer should feel free to mute the accompaniment if it seems distracting or undesirable—sound has no bearing on the analysis presented here.

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Dziga Vertov's *Man With A Movie Camera* (1929), having recently celebrated its 80th anniversary, is a treasure of Soviet cinema. Of all cinema, really. Vertov's film is a courageous and formidable work in countless respects, well deserving the popular and academic attention it has received throughout its 80 years. It's fair to argue that such a film is therefore quite undeserving of the sordid analysis presented here. Alas, that argument awaits my critics, and certain viewers who choose to ignore the barefaced and brazen sexual insinuation coursing through this film. My claim here is to present striking parallels between Vertov's *Camera* (potent images of a film *Camera* appear throughout the film, both with and without a camera operator) and the ubiquitous cock in heterosexual, narrative pornographic film. This study will not be limited to a simple *Camera-as-Cock* comparison, but will also comprise an analysis of Vertov's depictions of the *Camera Operator's*

relationship to his hefty tools of empowerment, capture, and ejaculation (the film *Camera* and the film *Projector*) in relation to the (generalized) male pornstar's reliance on his equally essential tool of sexual triumph—the *Cock*. But let us not rush to penetration before we have set the mood...

Dziga Vertov was a racy figure, both socially and politically; his artistic body of work served principally to advance his contentious ideals.<sup>1</sup> As a teenager, he began writing extensively on the subject of cinema; his poems and manifestos were remarkably confident and sometimes virulent. He unequivocally despised traditional narrative filmmaking and sought to establish a cinematic language independent of literature and theatre (as proclaimed most succinctly in the opening titles of *Man With a Movie Camera*). An account of Vertov's writings and contemporary critical responses to his work are found in Yuri Tsivian's *Lines of Resistance*, skillfully tracking Vertov's career through the 1920's as he built toward realizing *Man With A Movie Camera*, the pinnacle of his artistic and critical success.

Before leaping into an analysis of Vertov's chef-d'oeuvre, it is worth noting that the filmmaker's name (Dziga Vertov) is an adopted one. Born Denis Kaufman, he assumed the name Dziga Vertov as a tribute to the medium he championed so fervently. "Dziga Vertov, adopted at the very threshold of his working life, is derived from the verb which means to spin or rotate; the onomatopoeia of the first name, as Vertov intimated, reproduces the repetitive sound of a camera crank turning (dziga, dziga, dziga...)" writes

Annette Michelson in her introduction to *Kino-Eye*.<sup>2</sup> Evidently Vertov believed in the supreme power of cinema, and accordingly changed his name to reflect his worship of the craft. The same spirit of devotion that inspired Vertov in the 1920's would spur on the famous Cocksman of narrative pornography's "golden age" in the 1970's. Many leading porn actors and filmmakers of this period assumed names that similarly announced a passionate commitment to their *métier*—Dick Nasty, Long Dong Silver, and Dale DaBone are fine examples of noms de guerre employed in this respect.

Though much of *Man with a Movie Camera*'s blatant sexual impulsiveness is not until much later on, an early sequence foreshadows it all quite palpably. A mere 10 minutes into the film we see a young woman rise from bed, put her stockings on, and turn away from the camera while removing her nightgown. In close-up, the camera studies her back as her hands reach around to fasten a brassiere. Cutting back to a wider shot, we see the woman standing only in her underclothes and stockings before she pulls on a slip. Vertov immediately cuts away to a close-up of the Movie Camera as a man's hands hastily remove a short, wide-angle lens, and replace it with a markedly longer, telephoto one. This erection is quite pronounced, and indeed well warranted! Showing a woman dressing is more seemly and less lurid than showing a woman undressing, but is it any less sexy?

### **"Part 2" of *Man With A Movie Camera***

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AeKKeiXTBos>

This section covers roughly minutes 9-19 of the complete film.

Nearly 21 minutes in, a sequence commences featuring the Camera Operator (presumably Mikhail Kaufman, Vertov's younger brother and principal cameraman during this time) perched dangerously atop a moving car as he photographs the passengers in nearby horse-drawn carriages. The Cameraman furiously cranks his camera, propelling it into action, obsessively capturing the images before him. His gestures are explicitly masturbatory—the Camera is manically tugged upon (*dziga, dziga, dziga...*) as the operator hunches over his tool of capture, power, and domination. When a lady passenger mimics the crude crank-gesturing back at the Cameraman, is he embarrassed or intimidated? No, for he is in control! It is clear that Vertov's technique is beyond mere voyeurism. There is nothing covert about his Cameraman's imposition on his subjects. His camera has empowered him to subjugate them in a way. Vertov presents a series of images as still

frames immediately following the precarious carriage sequence—these images of carriage passengers are held for several seconds each (including one frightfully unattractive portrait of the indignant gesturing woman), exemplifying the filmmaker's power. Having tagged and dominated these subjects with his Kino-tool, their images have become his captives. It is now the filmmaker's privilege to exhibit them as he fancies!

### **"Part 3" of *Man With A Movie Camera***

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u2RKIDFmui4>

This section covers roughly minutes 20-29 of the complete film.

Vertov's ardent belief in the synthesis between humanity and technology pervaded every aspect of his work. "We: Variant of a Manifesto," written in 1922, boldly proclaims: "Our path leads through the poetry of machines, from the bungling citizen to the perfect electric man,"<sup>3</sup> precisely heralding the mechanical super-humanity he would present in *Man with a Movie Camera*, several years later. In *Hard Core*, Linda Williams' seminal study of pornography, she describes *A Country Stud Horse* (1920), an early American stag film where a man stands at a mutoscope with his face pressed against the viewing interface to watch a striptease.<sup>4</sup> Cutting directly to closeups of the stripper's naked body, the film privileges the viewer with a sort of super-human sight, offering closer views than would be realistically available to the man at the mutoscope. The film repeatedly cuts back to reveal the male voyeur manually propelling the crank-powered mutoscope with one hand while masturbating with the other. This early example of human sexuality being bolstered by a cine-mechanical aid points directly toward Vertov's vision of an improved human experience through technological innovation.

Vertov's goal to actually see the world better through cinema can be easily interpreted as a manifestation of what Michel Foucault calls *scientia sexualis*, humanity's basic impulse to detail an increasingly scientific understanding of sexuality.<sup>5</sup> "I am kino-eye, I am a mechanical eye. I, a machine, show you the world as only I can see it," writes Vertov in 1923.<sup>6</sup> Though he does not actually delve into pornography in any way, his efforts convey the same will to knowledge/power that motivate our *scientia sexualis*—he maps the modern city with the same care and passion he devotes to the study of a woman dressing in the morning. His project assumes what Linda Williams defines as the principle of maximum visibility: a compulsive desire to show all, to find the best formal techniques and applications

to explore one's subject.<sup>7</sup> Vertov certainly shares this fundamental compulsion that is so essential to hard-core narrative pornography—his desire to explore the mechanisms of modern city-living is the same impulse that motivates the pornographer to find the best way to represent genitalia, intercourse, and drives his impossible quest to depict actual consummation, the most life-affirming, yet visually elusive moment of all.

### “Part 7” of *Man With A Movie Camera*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L8HiRQjEhF4>

This section covers roughly minutes 50-59 of the complete film.

Beginning 25 minutes in, and continuing with much more prowess later on, we see the Camera appearing to act independently. Perched high above a busy city intersection, the camera pans (seemingly of its own accord) across the scene, glaring down upon its subjects. At 55 minutes, we see the Camera and Camera Operator superimposed upon the skyline of the city, towering above it, surveying the fiefdom that covers beneath them. A few minutes later, depicted through the skilful application of stop-motion photography, the Camera (now appearing without its Operator) leaps from its case onto the tripod mount and begins to dance around. Clearly, the Camera itself is the film's star, the truly principal figure. Despite this cheeky bit of animation, the viewer understands that the Camera is merely an appendage of its Operator; and yet, this tool is indispensable, as the Cock is to the Cocksman in pornography.

Though Vertov claimed to abhor narrative cinema, he undeniably created an infamous onscreen character by depicting his Camera/Operator with such creativity and reverence.<sup>8</sup> In narrative pornography, the Cocksman is a surrogate for the (usually) male film director, much as Vertov's Cameraman is his own surrogate, acting upon the desires of the artist who provides the gaze, the frame through which the audience participates in the experience.

Vertov's Camera casts its gaze upon every detail, from the most magnificent to the most quotidian. From the boulevards to the factories to the private bedrooms of Moscow, Odessa, Kiev, he reveals the activity of daily city life. The Camera captures these images, and Vertov is the loving master of his captured subjects—he dominates tenderly, with care and precision. He then demonstrates his authority and supremacy through montage! He exhibits his captives at length, in quick succession, depending his will. Here the metaphor of

Kino-Cock becomes fully realized, as Vertov shifts his focus increasingly toward projection in the final 7 minutes of the film. He repeatedly shows images of a captive audience positioned beneath an enormous screen. Bright ejaculations of light from Vertov's Projector complete the Kino-Cock corollary as images blast out upon his audience with the virility of explosive territorial cumshots!

Mark how the fevered pace of Vertov's montage responds to the increased intensity of the hand-cranking Cameraman as the film builds toward this climax! The quick succession of shots is itself orgasmic, as charging trains intercut with floods of micro pedestrians gushing through the streets! Each image itself a blast of semen! Each exploding upon the last, raging toward sheer ecstasy and complete satisfaction! This climax, this ultimate act of sublimation is a pure celebration of cinema! Each shot an affirmation of life, each blast a little gob of humanity! Cinema itself is bursting, ejaculating the cities of Eastern Europe upon the crowd! Oh, the spoils of the filmmaker! The—oh, Oh—OH! OH FUCK! Oh.

### “Part 8” of *Man With A Movie Camera*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2sON2MxgFnE>

This section covers roughly minutes 60-68 of the complete film.

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## FOOTNOTES

- 1 Tsivian, Yuri. *Lines of Resistance* (p.5-14). In his introduction, Tsivian provides a concise account of Vertov's ideologies and principal grievances, including his feuds with popular Marxist thinkers and publishers, as well as celebrated Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein.
- 2 Michelson, Annette. *Kino-Eye* (p. xviii)
- 3 Vertov, Dziga. “We: A Variant Manifesto” reproduced in *Kino-Eye* ed. Annette Michelson, (p8).
- 4 Williams, Linda. *Hard Core...* (p78-79).
- 5 Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality* (p51-73)
- 6 Vertov, Dziga. “Kinocs: A Revolution” reproduced in *Kino-Eye* ed. Annette Michelson (p.17)
- 7 Williams, Linda. *Hard Core* (p.48-49)

8 This irony was not missed by Soviet film critics at the time. See: Tsivian, Yuri. *Lines of Resistance*. (p.321-346)

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## FILMOGRAPHY

*Man With A Movie Camera* (Dziga Vertov, 1929)

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*Edited by Lindsey Campbell.*