THE SIXTH PART OF THE FRAME – Vertov's MAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA restored
(Adelheid Heftberger)

Introduction

Dziga Vertov's film MAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA is without doubt one of the most famous Soviet films and maybe one of the most famous films altogether. However, it is rather surprising that cinéastes and film scholars all over the world so far have mostly watched a print which is scarred by careless handling by laboratory technicians and archive staff in the past. The restoration carried out between 2008 and 2010 by the EYE Film Institute (then still Nederlands Filmmuseum) in Amsterdam allows contemporary audiences the possibility to once again experience Vertov’s film as the filmmaker originally intended - or at least in a version that comes as close to this as is nowadays possible. The project has been supervised by senior curator Mark-Paul Meyer, while I had the chance and pleasure to contribute with archival research.

In order to save space, time or simple lack of awareness of the proper treatment of film prints as important documents, mistakes were made which over a long time have shaped the impression on film scholarship and on the perception of the viewers of a film. Particularly in the case of MAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA a lot has been written about its montage, its image composition and overall visual qualities. It is all the more important to emphasize, that a film should be shown and seen true to its original format if possible; something which has not been discussed enough until recently as my contribution will try to show. I will mainly talk about two major issues, one related to the image format and one to the film’s structure.

Until the 1950s, films were shot and screened on highly flammable nitrate film stock. After the introduction of the so-called safety film stock, archives hurried to preserve as much of their collections as possible for safety reasons. By then sound film had been the standard format for about 30 years already and in order to unite image and sound on one film strip, in the printer some space on the left side of the film frame was reserved for the optical sound stock. In the early days of printing silent film though, very often a regrettable mistake was made: obviously without further reflecting on silent film formats, the narrower gate for sound film was used in the printing machine. This was, according to Mark-Paul Meyer, common in the 1950s, because there was typically only one type of mask available. Because there was no soundtrack to add, this portion of the frame remained blank after development and one sixth of the image was irretrievably lost. To make matters worse, in many cases the original material on nitrate film stock was destroyed after the

1 The last poll (2012) of the Sight & Sound Magazine’s “10 Best Films of All Time” it came 8th place, which is quite impressive for a Documentary, see: http://www.filmsite.org/sightsound.html [last accessed 14.5.2016].
2 Personal conversation with Mark-Paul Meyer.
printing. This is also what happened to the widely circulating print of MAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA, which was manufactured at Gosfilmofond and was the source for most prints in the west due to their FIAF membership.

An archival practice which was firmly in place until not long ago, was to splice two 300 meter reels, so called “half reels”, together in order to save film cans and thus also shelf space. Sometimes, as has been the case in the Austrian Film Museum, the overall goal was to merely fit as much film as possible into one can, even messing with the original division and in the process leading to fewer reels overall. Another reason for this procedure was that it proved more practical in projection, because there was one less changeover for the projectionist to carry out. Unfortunately for film scholars, many times valuable information was cut out and dismissed as being not important anymore, as happened with MAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA. Vertov in 1929 had added specific markers for the start and end of each reel with a distinct vision in his head. The restoration aimed also at bringing back the lost parts and recreate the original structure of the film.

Next to the praiseworthy intention to make MAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA again available for the audience in its original form, another reason for the restoration project should be mentioned as well. At that time, the Dutch government very generously poured money into its cultural heritage. Under the slogan “Images for the Future” Dutch film heritage (which by the EYE’s definition includes foreign films shown in the Netherlands) could be preserved and made accessible. MAN WITH THE MOVIE CAMERA had been selected to be one of their projects.

Dziga Vertov in “Western Europe”

As is well documented, Dziga Vertov only traveled abroad twice in his life. The first time was in 1929, when he toured with MAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA. He stayed mostly in Germany between the beginning of May and the beginning of August, and participated in the influential Film- and Photo exhibition (FiFo), organized by the German Werkbund in Stuttgart, by invitation of his friends El Lissitzky and his wife Sophie Küppers. Basically discovered there by German critics and filmmakers, Vertov was then invited to go to La Saraz in Switzerland in order to take part in the 1st Congress of Independent Film. However, due to a return call from his production company VUFKU, he had to decline and famously Sergej Eisenstein attended in his place.4

In 1931, when promoting his next film ENTHUSIASM, Vertov could finally travel abroad again. This time he went on an even longer and more ambitious tour including several countries; he left the Soviet Union in June and returned in December 1931.5 The filmmaker started in his home

5 See Tode for a detailed research of the journey.
town Bialystok (Poland) to pay a short visit to his parents (on 14th July) and headed on to Berlin, where he spent nearly three months (17th July to 12th September). On 13th September he showed his most recent film in Hamburg, later in Breslau (20th September), then in Berlin again (27th September) and finally in Frankfurt (4th October). After that Vertov traveled to Basel (18th October) and Zurich (19th October), landed in Great Britain (15th London and 17th November) and finally arrived in Paris, where he stayed from 24th November until 6th December with his brother Boris, then working as a cameraman for Jean Vigo. The most important event in relation to the restoration of MAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA, is his trip to the Netherlands in December 1931. Vertov had been invited by the newly founded Filmliga, a group of dutch filmmakers and film enthusiasts, including famous names like Joris Ivens. The Russian filmmaker appeared with ENTHUSIASM in a night screening in Rotterdam on 9th December, and finally presented MAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA in Amsterdam on the 10th December. After that he went back to Berlin (17th December).

The special screening in the Corso cinema which was accompanied by an orchestra was enthusiastically reviewed by the Dutch press. As is reported by the Algemeen Handelsblad, the Corso was filled to the brim when the film was screened in a closed viewing on the 10th December. Vertov was present and responded to shouts from the audience himself, while the screening was described by the reviewer as generally very lively. The director in his introduction also apologized in advance for the music, which he had compiled only in one day and said that it might be a bit clumsy. However, the review complements the “little orchestra” which had played that night - it had apparently “worked wonders”. MAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA had afterwards been shown in the Uitkijk cinema in Amsterdam on three consecutive nights in three parts. As the Algemeen Handelsblad reports on the 12th December, which was after the first open screening, the impact there wasn’t quite as positive, due to the bad musical accompaniment (apparently there had only been a Gramophone in use). The film “had been killed by the music”, as the reviewer remarked. Vertov’s film had also been screened in a combined program together with the by now forgotten Austrian film DER VAGABUND (1930) by Fritz Weiß. For the screenings, Vertov had brought with him his own print of MAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA, which he carried around on his journey and sold it to the Filmliga afterwards. This wasn't an unusual practice at that time, because Soviet directors were encouraged to co-finance their journeys abroad. This is why a pristine contemporary print of the film has been preserved in the Netherlands to date.

Comparison of the prints

7 Ibid.
It was never doubted, that the basis and main material source for the restoration would be the aforementioned 35mm nitrate vintage print from the Dutch Filmliga. The print despite its quality, is incomplete. In order to decide which film prints were needed to supplement the Dutch nitrate print, material from other archives was studied and compared. Particular attention was paid to the 16mm reduction print, also held at EYE, which had been made from the nitrate source early on and had been shown well into the 1940s. Furthermore, reports on several additional 35mm safety prints were made, one from the Russian State Documentary Film & Photo archive (RGAKFD, Krasnogorsk), one from the Národní filmový archiv (NFA, Prague), one from the Austrian Film Museum (ÖFM, Vienna), and one 35mm print had been viewed by Yuri Tsivian in the Television Archive in Riga. It turned out, that actually none of the existing prints viewed match exactly. They all differ in regards to the degree of interference, and sometimes the material also just bares the wear and tear of usage.

Let’s begin with the nitrate print from 1929, which Vertov had left behind in the Netherlands. It had been already been preserved previously, but only in a straightforward analogue preservation. It should also be noted that the full frame nitrate print (see Fig. 1) was of excellent photographic quality and even better results were expected by carrying out a digital restoration. The reasons for a restoration in 2008 had been made mainly to tackle the unsolved issues. One of them was the attempted reconstruction of the original reel structure and the animated end title in Ukrainian (see Fig. 2), another bringing the missing birth scene back, which had been removed from the Dutch print by the local censor (see Fig. 3). Some images have been included here to provide a better impression of these issues at stake. For simplicity sake, I will refer to the cropped version of the film, which has been circulated since the 1950s by Gosfilmofond to the western archives, as “GFF print”, although the frame grabs are taken from the print held at the Austrian Film Museum in Vienna.

![Fig. 1: Comparison between the cropped GFF version (left) and the Dutch full frame version (right). It is clearly visible that an important part of the image on the left side of the frame is missing due to the printing error.](image-url)
Fig. 2: End title in Russian in the GFF print (on the left) and the animated Ukrainian title in the EYE print (on the right). The titles in the GFF print had been replaced with a newer font, as has been the practice in Russian film archives around the 1950s.

Fig. 3: The birth scene, removed from the Dutch print by censors in 1931, but still present in the GFF print. Just as a side note, the baby filmed was born in the breech position, which only about 3-5% of all women have. Knowing Vertov's way of filmmaking, could this be a coincidence?

In a table I’ll compare the three selected features, in order to show which of them could or couldn’t be found in the different prints. By “beginning title” I mean the opening of the film, where Vertov states his claim, that his film will have no resemblance to a traditional feature film (e.g. made without script, actors etc.). Prints that were not full frame and also didn’t include the Ukrainian end title could be ruled out straight away. The problematic issue of the birth scene remained, because it can only be found in the cropped GFF/ÖFM version. The full frame version is preserved at RGAKFD, because the archive received the Original-Negative on nitrate film stock (негатив нитро) from Gosfilmofond, and now holds a safety Negativ (Контратип три.), a Dup-Positive (Лавенда три.) and a Positive print (позитив три.).
Unfortunately the archive didn’t reply to requests from the EYE, but luckily the Austrian Film Museum had in 2006 acquired one reel of the full frame version from RGAKFD. This reel contains the birth scene and could be made available to the EYE for the restoration. As can be seen in the table below, there were no beginning titles in the Dutch print and also no evidence, that there actually had been either Ukrainian titles or Dutch titles when the film was screened in Amsterdam. It still was decided to re-create the titles in English for the restored print.

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<th>Full frame</th>
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Another very important difference is the lost original act structure which Vertov had created. The director had divided the film into six acts (six 300 Meter reels), which he marked by animated silvery numbers one to six. At the beginning of each act the number would rise by means of a film trick, and fall again in the same way at the end of the reel. As has been said already, the end title was designed similarly, depicting the Ukrainian word “kinec” for “end”. The numbers had been cut out presumably by archival staff (or projectionists?) in earlier years, owing to the aforementioned joining of reels to save space as an economical measure. It is also likely that the numbers have not been understood really as an integral part of the film, but rather merely as a visual aid for the projectionists, which wasn’t meant to be seen by the audience.

In most prints only the first rising number, “1”, had survived. The reason for that is, that it appears not at the beginning of a reel, but some minutes into the film, after the prologue, where it would have been more difficult to remove. This shot has probably from then on been a bit hard to decipher for the audiences. Viewers of the GFF print could only guess, that Vertov had intended to signal the beginning of the first act specifically and then not bothered to follow up on the concept for unknown reasons. Still, knowing Vertov and his meticulously planned films, this argument sounds quite weak. Not many film scholars have commented on this curious appearance of the rising number one. Only the consultation of a non-violated print finally shows the original idea. All the numbers from 1 to 6 were meant to rise and fall (Fig. 4), one number for each reel and the falling end title was part of the concept.
Fig. 4: Examples of the rising and falling reel numbers 1,2 and 3 to be found for example in the 16mm print at EYE.

Again, a table will present an overview of the strangely inconsistent traces of these numbers remaining in different prints. As has been mentioned before, unluckily the 35mm Dutch nitrate had also been tampered with, showing the numbers 1 and 2 only and furthermore in the wrong places, while the others were missing at all. The reduction print on 16mm turned out to be the best source known, because it showed the most complete pattern next to the print from RGAKFD. It should also be noted, that many times, even if the numbers existed in prints, there were usually only a few frames left and they therefore didn’t show the complete movement.

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The cropped frame, the missing birth scene and the reel numbers were for sure the most important tasks to solve for the restoration. The nitrate print was checked at the Austrian Film Museum in Vienna by Mark-Paul Meyer, together with the long-serving archivist Edith Schlemmer and the author. A detailed comparison with the ÖFM print content wise was done, but of course the opportunity was taken to do a proper material based examination of the material (Fig. 5). As can be seen in the photo on the right, the falling Nr. 2 had been cut in the wrong place in the Dutch print.

Fig. 5: Images of the Dutch nitrate print of MAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA, taken during the analysis at the Austrian Film Museum.

For film scholars not only the numbers are important of course, but also the images after the numbers have to be considered. In the ÖFM print for example, the reel beginnings and end were completely messed up, because of the economic way of filling cans. So the original start and end points had to be re-created by comparing this print with another one. This research was done within the interdisciplinary project “Digital Formalism” (2007 to 2010)

9, including Yuri Tsivian.10 If we look at the images, they show the camera traveling through a window into a room (1A11), a camera iris closing (1B), iris opening again (2A), strips of film (2B), a shelve with film samples (3A), a cameraman accompanying firefighters (3B), a camera lens tilting down (4A), rising again (4B), machines starting to work (5A), Michael Kaufman on a motorbike moving towards the camera

9 The author has been a project member as well.

10 For a more detailed description of the research see: Adelheid Heftberger, Yuri Tsivian, Matteo Lepore: Man with a Movie Camera under the Lens of Cinematics. In: Klemens Gruber, Barbara Wurm, Vera Kropf (Hg.): Digital Formalism. Die kalkulierten Bilder des Dziga Vertov. Maske und Kothurn 55/3 (2009), p. 31-50.

11 Beginning of reel 1. 1B end of reel one etc.
(5B), the sea seen from a ship (6A) and the iris closing again (6B). As Tsivian pointed out, we can
detect a poetic structure, but at the same time Vertov playfully breaks the rhyme pattern:

But, importantly, none of the eight filming shots is an exact repetition of any other one. They vary in terms of
shot scales and in terms of movement. Let us take a quick look at some of Vertov’s “rhymes”: 2A is the same
shot as 1B with the iris blades moving in opposite directions. The subtle joke these two shots play on us is that
these are the proverbial “iris-in” and “iris-out”, only glimpsed from the other side of the fence. 4A and 4B turn
the camera lens into a semblance of the sun rising from the horizon in A and setting in B. Intended, perhaps, to
repeat, in a nutshell, the day-cycle structure of the film as a whole. 6B combines two opposite movements: As
the eye widens, the iris narrows — the climax and closure in the same shot.\footnote{Heftberger, Tsivian, Lepore, p. 40.}

Finally after the historical research and the decision of which material to use, the nitrate print was
scanned in 2K at Haghefilm Conservation (now Haghefilm Digitaal) using a modified optical
printer by Oxberry fitted with a wet gate. The parts from the 16mm print were scanned, as was the
missing shot from the reel coming from the Austrian Film Museum. Finally the structure of the
film, as Vertov had intended it, could be re-established by using the numbers from the 16mm print.
However, the number 6 was missing also from that material, so it had to be digitally reconstructed
at Haghefilm.

Afterwards the different parts were joined digitally and graded. It has to be said, that it
proved quite difficult to receive good results in the black and white grading and the overall look of
the finished print, which had been lasered out on Negative film stock and from which a Positive
print was made. This print had been premiered at Muziekgebouw in Amsterdam on the 7th of April
2009 with a live musical accompaniment by Michael Nyman. In 2014 the restored version appeared
on Blu-ray following additional digital restoration work by the French company Lobster.

Finally I would like to draw attention to some other interesting characteristics as far as
differences in content are concerned. The Dutch 35mm nitrate print contains a couple of shots
which can’t be found in the same place or in the same length in the GFF print. To report all the
differences in detail would be too tiresome to repeat here and would also not really make sense. But
some particular shots which do not appear at all, are worth mentioning, while we can only speculate
as to why that’s the case (Fig. 6). The first image can be found in the prologue, showing the movie
theater while the curtain opens. The other two images (the couple selling an alcoholic drink and the
film strips) are meanwhile located at reel ends and beginnings, suggesting that they may have been
removed due to wear and tear rather than a deliberate act. Still, it is noteworthy that always the
whole shot has been removed and reflect on the image content.
Particularly interesting in terms of montage, is one rapidly edited sequence at the very end of the film (Fig. 7). As we know, the last minutes are already cut with tremendous speed, but in the Dutch print we can find some additional shots (mostly single frames only) which give the ending of the film a special quality. First of all, the short shot of the car driving away, was most likely also in Vertov’s THE ELEVENTH YEAR, more specifically in the lost last reel of the film, as another research study has tried to prove.\textsuperscript{13} The shot with a cameraman holding his camera and turning slowly has also not appeared previously and does not occur in the GFF version. Why this fascinating piece of editing mastery cannot be found in other prints remains unsolved so far. To give a better impression of the dynamics of the sequence, a visualization shows the whole episode in its full length (Fig. 8).

\begin{figure}[h]
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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{fig6.png}
\caption{Fig. 6: Additional shots in the EYE print, missing in GFF/ÖFM print. The image on the right is cut in just after the rising of the Nr. 3.}
\end{figure}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{fig7.png}
\caption{Fig. 7: Additional shots in the Dutch print, which are missing in GFF print, in the rapidly edited sequence at the end of the film.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{13} Vertov in Blum. Published on the DVD Odinnadcatyj / Šestaja čast’ mira, Edition Filmmuseum, Munich 2010. Video Essay created together with Michael Loebenstein and Georg Wasner.
But the opposite case, images missing in the Dutch print, is also true. The shot of Kaufman on his motorbike, moving towards the camera at the end of reel 5 is missing from the Dutch print and as a result is also missing in the restored version. But every restorer is faced with the need to compromise (whether due to limitations of time, financial resources or technical limitations) and there is rarely such a thing as a “perfect” restoration.

Some images have been found back-to-front (sometimes even upside down too) in the GFF print and it is not quite clear why this happened (Fig. 9 and Fig. 10). Perhaps it is just another example of careless lab work, but can we be completely sure, that Vertov is not playing with our perception and had experimented? Or is the reason a lot more mundane, a simple mistake by an archivist, who for some reason spliced the images in the wrong way?

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14 Visualized by the author, using ImageJ Software.
Fig. 9: Image back-to-front in the GFF print (left), correct (?) in the Dutch print (right).

Fig. 10: Image back-to-front and upside down in the GFF print (left), correct (?) in the Dutch print (right).

Conclusion

The restoration of MAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA has indeed succeeded in correcting more than one historical mistake conducted by thoughtless laboratory and archival staff. It shows that film in earlier times did not have the status as a document which needs to be studied both in terms of content and material qualities and understood properly. The case of Vertov’s dismissed numbers is most likely just one example of many, where directors put a lot of effort in the manifestation and design of the reel structures. In the same way, audiences should look out for images of silent films which seem slightly off center. There are many other cases for similar restorations provided that original copies in the original formats are not irretrievably lost.