

MacKay, John. Dziga Vertov: Life and Work (Volume 1: 1896-1921). Film and Media Studies. Academic Studies Press, Boston, MA, 2018. xcvi + 372 pp. Notes. Illustrations. Charts. Archives Consulted. Filmography. Bibliography. Index. \$129.00: £123.00 (hardback); \$35.00: £29.95 (paperback).

DZIGA Vertov (1896-1954), one of the most influential Soviet filmmakers of his generation, is best known in the West as the director of Man with a Movie Camera (*Chelovek s kinoapparatom*, 1929), arguably the greatest documentary film ever made. He was also a vociferous theorist, who rejected fiction cinema and advocated nonfiction filmmaking as the best vehicle for representing the revolutionary new Soviet world. Much has been written about Vertov, but John MacKay's book – volume one of his much anticipated three-volume study – is the first English-language biography devoted to him. MacKay describes it as a 'critical-biographical study' (p. xxxiii), but this unassuming designation does not do justice to his work's extraordinary scope and range of reference.

MacKay's lengthy introduction (which refers not only to the present volume, but also to the forthcoming volumes two and three) provides a critical overview of the most important waves of Vertov reception since his death in 1954. A tour de force of summary, synthesis and clarity, MacKay's survey ranges widely across scholarship published in Russian, English, French and German, demonstrating how it has been inflected by shifting historical, ideological and cultural contexts, and guiding the reader through the numerous 'textual labyrinth[s]' (p. lxii) that have developed around key Vertovian concepts, such as Kino-Pravda (Film-Truth) and Kino-Glaz (Kino-Eye).

The book's main body covers the first twenty-five years of the filmmaker's life, from his birth, as David Abelevich Kaufman, on 15 January 1896 to the end of 1921. By this time, he had changed his name twice (first to Denis Arkad'evich Kaufman, then to Dziga Vertov) and embarked on a career in the nascent Soviet cinema industry. He had not yet made any of his major films, however, or written any of his most significant theoretical texts.

MacKay's purposes in focusing on the early period of the filmmaker's life are to uncover 'the "beginnings of the historical object" called Vertov' (p. 2), to trace the trajectory of his cinematic and theoretical practice, and to assess the influence on his filmmaking of the various contexts – familial, social, cultural, ideological and historical – in which he lived and worked. Thus Chapter 1, which covers the period 1896 to 1914, explores David Kaufman's pre-war life with his family in their hometown of Bialystok, an industrial, largely Jewish city. Chapter Two explores the years that Kaufman spent as a student at the Petrograd Psychoneurological Institute (1914-16), where he made crucial personal connections and was exposed to ideological trends that shaped his artistic approach and worldview. Chapter Three takes us from the autumn of 1916, when Kaufman was drafted into the army, to the spring of 1918, when he began working as an office manager and bookkeeper in the Moscow Film Committee. Finally, Chapter Four, which covers the period 1918-21, examines Vertov's early experience in newsreel and other modes of nonfiction filmmaking, and his involvement in propaganda and agitation, as a worker on one of the legendary agit-trains that travelled across Russia and Ukraine during the Civil War years.

While Vertov is the book's focus, MacKay's concern to explore his historical context ensures that this work also tells the story of an entire generation, whose formative years coincided with some of the most momentous events in Russian and world history: the First World War, the October Revolution, the Civil War, and the emergence of the new Soviet state, which demanded of its artists new ways of representing the world.

One of the book's most consistently interesting features is its focus on people whose influence shaped Vertov's future film work. Masha Gal'pern, Vertov's charismatic maternal aunt, emerges as an impressive figure. A graduate of the prestigious Women's Medical

Institute in St Petersburg, who gained her medical licence in 1912 and worked in Minsk during World War I, organizing medical aid for refugees, Masha was, possibly, both the inspiration behind Vertov's oft-noted 'feminism' and a prototype of the many strong women who appear in his films as exemplary Soviet citizens (pp. 62-63). Also significant was Vertov's childhood friend, the future journalist Mikhail Kol'tsov, who gave Vertov his first job in cinema in 1918 and without whom, MacKay believes, '[Vertov] never would have made films' (p. 162). From Vertov's time on the agit-train the October Revolution, the Old Bolshevik politician Mikhail Kalinin stands out: his skilful rhetoric (along with the agitational murals that adorned the train itself) might have taught Vertov some of the tricks of political persuasion and agitation that he exploited in his films.

I use the hypothetical 'might have' advisedly, following MacKay's example. While he strives for documented precision, there are few sources on Vertov's life in this period, which means that MacKay is frequently required to speculate in order to fill in the gaps. He is, however, scrupulously conscientious both in interrogating his own suppositions and in highlighting when his conclusions involve an element of speculation. Moreover, as they are arrived at via a careful weighing up of all available evidence, his estimations are invariably persuasive. Similarly, MacKay never loses sight of the possibility that his inference of influence might be overly conditioned by his awareness of 'the Vertov we now know' (p. 1). This careful approach, maintained consistently throughout the book, is emblematic of MacKay's exemplary scholarship.

This is also evident in the book's copious and dense footnotes. They not only document MacKay's sources (he is meticulous in acknowledging and engaging with the work of other scholars and draws on a vast range of secondary sources), they are also exceptionally useful. Many function as annotated biographies and filmographies: note 45 (p. xxx), for example, lists all the musical scores composed for Man with a Movie Camera; note 100 (pp. 234-35) lists all published work in English and Russian on early Soviet mobile agitation (agit-trains, boats and other vehicles).

Perhaps the volume's most valuable contribution, however, and the main source of its originality, is MacKay's extensive use of archival sources. This enables him to provide an account that is more detailed and more nuanced than those in previous scholarship on Vertov. Archival sources underpin his thorough analysis of Vertov's contribution to the Kino-Nedelia (Film-Week) series (1918-19) and of its significance to his later filmmaking (pp. 193-233). They inform his compelling account of Vertov's agit-train work (pp. 233-86). And they enable his discussion of the pre-Revolutionary cinema work of Grigorii Boltianskii (from March 1917 the head of the Social Nonfiction/Newsreel Section of the Skobolev Educational Committee), which sheds light on the underexplored topic of nonfiction filmmaking in late-Imperial Russia (p. 91-97).

MacKay's concern to return to primary sources also enables him to interrogate many of the interpretations on which previous Vertov scholarship has relied and to correct any mischaracterisations of Vertov's practice. Most significant is the discussion, in Chapter Four, of the numerous and varied meanings of the Russian term khronika (literally, chronicle), which English-language scholarship on Vertov has tended to translate simply as 'newsreel' (pp. 198-205). As MacKay demonstrates, by examining instances of the term khronika in scores of archival documents, 'newsreel' was in fact only one 'referent' (p. 199), or 'subset' (p. 200), of this capacious term, which could include films with staged sequences and whose dominant meaning, he concludes, is better rendered in English as 'historicized or narrativized nonfiction' (p. 203, emphasis in the original).

MacKay's careful mining of the archives also makes this a book full of unexpected gems. There is, for example, the account of how – at a meeting of the Left Front of the Arts (LEF) convened by the poet Vladimir Maiakovskii on 17 January 1925 – Vertov decried Lev

Kuleshov's hugely popular comedy The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr West in the Land of the Bolsheviks (Neobychainye prikliucheniia Mistera Vesta v strane bol'shevikov, 1924) as "counterrevolutionary", only to be shouted down by the other attendees (p. xiii). There are the poignant photographs of the young David Kaufman and his family (p. 35, p. 37, p. 67) and of the twenty-four-year-old Vertov ushering children into the cinema car of the October Revolution agit-train on which he served from 1920-21 (p. 233). And there is the affecting detail that among the films Vertov screened for the peasant children who visited this agit-train were two of Władysław Starewicz's comic pre-Revolutionary puppet films: The Grasshopper and the Ant (known in Russian as Strekoza [The Dragonfly] i muravei, 1913) – apparently the 'biggest hit' with those aged between five and ten years old (p. 277) – and The Tale of the Fisherman and the Little Fish (Skazka o rybake i rybke, 1913), which, Vertov noted in his official report of the day's activities, provoked "[a] roar of children's voices, explosions of laughter" (p. 262).

MacKay begins his Acknowledgements with the admission that '[w]riting about Dziga Vertov is both very difficult and a lot of fun.' (p. 301) The sheer hard work that has gone into researching and writing this exceptional volume is evident, but so too is MacKay's enjoyment of this task. His enthusiasm for his subject is both palpable and infectious, as is his curiosity. There is something for every reader in this treasure trove of a book, and we should be grateful that its publisher allowed MacKay the space to include everything that he wanted to include. It has enabled him to write a definitive account of the origins of the extraordinary filmmaker Dziga Vertov, which also makes a major contribution to our understanding of Russian and Soviet cinema, history and culture more broadly.