

**Allegory and Accommodation: Vertov's *Three Songs of Lenin* (1934) as a  
Stalinist film**

**(forthcoming in Film History; revised 1 November 2006)**

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Until at least the late 1980s, most film historians in the USSR (if not elsewhere) would doubtless have identified *Three Songs of Lenin* (1934; silent version 1935; re-edited in 1938 and 1970) as Dziga Vertov's greatest and most important contribution to Soviet and world cinema.<sup>i</sup> Although its reputation has now been definitively eclipsed by that of *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), *Three Songs* was certainly more widely exhibited and unambiguously honored than any of Vertov's other films during his lifetime.<sup>ii</sup> After being briefly shelved during the first half of 1934,<sup>iii</sup> the film was shown to great acclaim at the Venice Film Festival in August 1934.<sup>iv</sup> Prior to its general Soviet release in November 1934,<sup>v</sup> starting in July 1934, the film was exhibited in Moscow at private but publicized screenings to both Soviet (Karl Radek, Nikolai Bukharin, Stanislav Kossior) and foreign (H.G. Wells, André Malraux, M.A. Nexoe, Paul Nizan, William Bullitt, Sidney Webb) cultural and political luminaries; tributes to *Three Songs* by all of these figures were widely disseminated in the Soviet press.<sup>vi</sup> For unknown reasons, the

original sound version of *Three Songs* was withdrawn somewhere around 13 November from the major Moscow theaters where it had been playing, although it continued to be exhibited, apparently in substandard or fragmentary copies, for some time after that in Moscow and elsewhere.<sup>vii</sup> A silent version prepared especially for cinemas without sound projection capability was completed in 1935 and distributed widely in the USSR; both this version and the original sound *Three Songs* were re-edited by Vertov and re-released in 1938.<sup>viii</sup> Vertov never ceased speaking of *Three Songs* with pride, even (or especially) when he was compelled to apologize for his earlier “formalist” works;<sup>ix</sup> and it was the one Vertov film singled out for attention by Ippolit Sokolov in his 1946 collection of reviews of Soviet sound films.<sup>x</sup> During the Vertov revival of the post-Stalin years, *Three Songs* was apparently the first of his (in 1960) to receive publicized re-release in the USSR.<sup>xi</sup> A few years later, the film was subjected to a most problematic “restoration,” carried out in 1969 by Vertov’s wife and co-creator Elizaveta Svilova, together with Ilya Kopalin and Serafima Pumpyanskaya, and released (along with a very informative book)<sup>xii</sup> as part of the 1970 Lenin centenary. It is this 1970 version, distributed by Kino Video on VHS and DVD, which most of us know as *Three Songs of Lenin*.

Despite all of this, and notwithstanding its ready availability on VHS/DVD in the US and Europe, *Three Songs* has attracted remarkably little scholarly attention, at least until recently. Surely this neglect has something to do with the political-ethical embarrassment now attendant upon both the film’s ardent rhetorical participation in the Lenin cult and its unabashed celebration of the

“modernization” of the Muslim regions of the USSR and hymning of Soviet industrial and agricultural achievement more generally. It would seem that, for many critics, *Three Songs* stands in the same relation to Vertov’s earlier films as *Alexander Nevsky* (1938) does to Sergei Eisenstein’s experimental work of the 20s: a clear sign of that regression into authoritarianism and myth that came to compromise both filmmakers as creative artists and Soviet culture as a whole over the course of the 1930s.<sup>xiii</sup> Meanwhile, the film’s fraught history, involving three major reedits and the consequent disappearance of the original sound and silent versions, has no doubt made scholars rightly wary of investing too much interpretive energy in such a dubious text. The three versions coincide with three quite different political moments -- specifically, the full-scale inauguration of Stalin’s “personality cult” (and the waning of Lenin’s)<sup>xiv</sup> during the Second Five-Year Plan (1933-37); the complete establishment of the Stalin cult by the purge years of 1937-8; and the ongoing anti-Stalinist revisionism of the early “stagnation” period (1969-70). Given that the transition into (and out of) “Stalinist culture” is the real issue here, it is inevitable that the presence or absence of “Stalin” and “Stalinism” in *Three Songs* will figure centrally in any interpretation of the film.

Although many questions remain unanswered about the original 1934 *Three Songs*, archival evidence demonstrates rather clearly that Stalin’s image was far more prominent in that original film than in the familiar Svilova-Kopalin-Pumpyanskaya reedit, which can be described, with only the slightest qualification, as a “de-Stalinization” of the versions of the 1930s. Contemporary

reviews, for instance, make it plain that Stalin and references to Stalin were conspicuous in the third of the three “songs.” A critic who went by the Gogolian pseudonym “Vij,” writing about H.G. Wells’ viewing of the film (in Moscow on 26 July 1934), indicated that “the writer saw Lenin at the beginning and middle of the film, and Stalin in the middle and the end.”<sup>xv</sup> Timofei Rokotov, who later became well-known as the editor of the journal *International Literature*, praised the film’s conclusion in the following terms in his review of 4 November 1934:

It’s difficult to imagine a better ending to the film than that image of the super-powered train “Joseph Stalin,” rushing irrepressibly forward, above which shine the words of our leader: “The idea of storming [capitalism] is maturing in the consciousness of the masses.”<sup>xvi</sup>

The earliest extant versions of *Three Songs* (sound and silent) both contain the image of this well-known train, with “Joseph Stalin” inscribed on the front, near the film’s conclusion, and Rokotov’s comment strongly suggests that it was in the 1934 original as well. Certainly, the fact that Stalin’s then-famous comment -- “the idea of storming [capitalism] is maturing in the consciousness of the masses,” from his report to the 17<sup>th</sup> Party Congress (24 January 1934) -- served as the film’s concluding slogan is directly confirmed by Vertov’s script for *Three Songs*.<sup>xvii</sup> Rokotov makes an even more intriguing reference in his review to the film’s famous prologue, with its image of the “bench” on which Lenin sat:

... a little detail [that] says so much ... here is the same bench, well-known because of the photograph, where the great Lenin and his great student and comrade-in-arms Stalin sat and conversed – not so long ago, it would seem.<sup>xviii</sup>

Similarly, one V. Ivanov, in a review for *Rabochaia Penza* of 31 December 1934, describes the same section of the prologue as follows:

The bench. The memorable bench. You remember the picture: Lenin and Stalin in Gorki, 1922.<sup>xix</sup>

In contrast to the 1970 reedit, which offers a photograph of Lenin sitting alone on a bench during the prologue, the 1938 versions present a very famous and widely distributed image of Lenin sitting together with Stalin (Image 1). Clearly enough, the comments by Rokotov and Ivanov strongly suggest that the portrait of Lenin with Stalin was the one displayed in the original *Three Songs*.<sup>xx</sup>

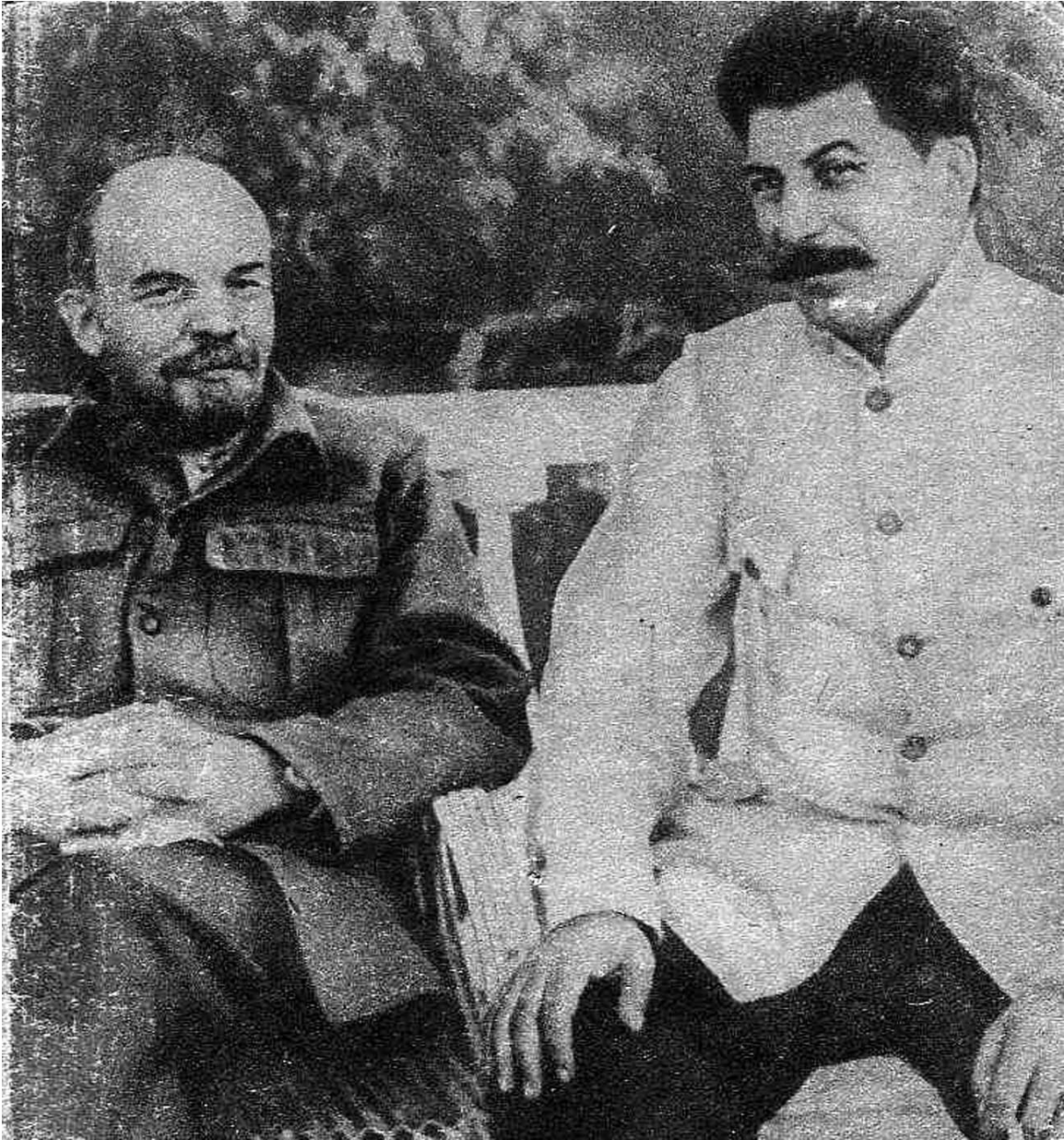


Image 1: The photo of the “seated Lenin” included in the 1938 (and possibly the 1934) versions of the prologue to *Three Songs* (Source: I.V. Stalin, *O Lenine* [*About Lenin*] (Moscow: Molodaia Gvardiia, 1932))

Finally, some of the most telling evidence of Stalin’s presence in the 1934 film comes from Vertov’s own notes and plans. In a letter of complaint dated 9 November 1934 to Mezhrabpomfil’m administrator Mogilevskii about the bad quality of the print of *Three Songs* being shown in Moscow’s Taganka theater,

Vertov notes that the shot of “Stalin walking about the Kremlin” is missing, among other absent footage; again, this shot is present in the extant (1938) versions in the third song, though not in the 1970 reedit.<sup>xxi</sup> Most strikingly, perhaps, a remarkable set of instructions from 1934 compiled by Vertov for the film’s sound projectionist indicate not only that Stalin appeared throughout the film, but that Vertov generally intended the volume of the soundtrack to take on “maximum loudness” when the dictator appeared, as (for example) during the funeral sequence.<sup>xxii</sup> By contrast, the 1970 version mutes the sound almost completely when Stalin appears at the funeral of Lenin – the only appearance he makes in the film.<sup>xxiii</sup>

In truth, one needs to acknowledge that even a cursory examination of the Soviet press in 1934 should have alerted film historians to the improbability of Stalin’s absence from the original *Three Songs of Lenin*; Stalin’s image was already ubiquitous by this time, and the notion of “the Party of Lenin and Stalin” quite firmly established.<sup>xxiv</sup> Yet the question remains: what effect should this knowledge have on our *reading* of the film, in contrast to our necessary efforts to establish a correct original text? That is, what precise difference does the presence or absence of Stalin make to our considerations of Vertov’s artistic evolution and of the structure and ideology of *Three Songs*, apart from what is already apparent from the 1970 version? To be sure, the idea of “Stalin” had become far more central to Soviet culture by 1934 than it had been in 1930, for instance, when Vertov made the film that preceded *Three Songs*, *Enthusiasm: Symphony of the Donbass*. And even the lack of an authoritative version of *Three*

*Songs* has not prevented those scholars who have ventured to write on the film (invariably, the 1970 reedit) over the last 20 years or so to identify it, quite rightly in my view, as marking a crucial turning point in Vertov's artistic career – specifically, the turning point between the “avant-garde” 1920s and the “Stalinist” 1930s – though the evaluations of this watershed moment differ significantly.

The critical consensus on the film – established perhaps first by Annette Michelson, and developed further by Klaus Kanzog and Oksana Bulgakowa – holds that *Three Songs* involves a rhetorical turn to “religious” or quasi “sacred” cinematic discourse (grounded, according to Kanzog's analysis of the film's “internalized religiosity,” in deep cultural memories of religious practice),<sup>xxv</sup> whether conceived as a passage from the “epistemological” to the “iconic” and “monumental” (Michelson),<sup>xxvi</sup> or from the “documentary” to the “allegorical” (Bulgakowa).<sup>xxvii</sup> In an essay that dissents from this “discontinuity thesis” while offering a newly positive evaluation of the film, Mariano Prunes stresses the continuities between *Three Songs* and the 1920s visual practice of both Vertov and his contemporaries in photography and film, arguing that the film incorporates and summarizes all the main streams of photographic visual practice of the preceding decade (constructivist *faktura*, documentary factography, and emergent Stalinist mythography), and in so doing “seriously brings into question the traditional view of Soviet art in the 1930s as absolutely intolerant of previous experimental practices.”<sup>xxviii</sup> Accordingly, Prunes does not regard the presence or absence of Stalin in the 1970 version as especially important, suggesting at most that the 1934 film was perceived as paying



insufficient homage to Lenin's "Successor" (thus necessitating the 1938 reedit with its "supplementary material on Stalin").<sup>xxxix</sup> For their part, Michelson and Bulgakowa regard the "Stalin" of *Three Songs* as a kind of structuring absence, as prying open "[a] space in which the Beckoning Substitute is now installed" (Michelson),<sup>xxx</sup> or even as an omnipresent but invisible quasi-divinity, "present only in metonymic indicators" (Bulgakowa).<sup>xxxi</sup> But once again, Stalin was neither a structuring absence in *Three Songs* nor actually absent: he was simply, explicitly part of the film's message and visual rhetoric.

To determine what that "part" actually consists in will first necessitate a reconsideration of the rhetoric of *Three Songs of Lenin*, both in terms of changes within the trajectory of Soviet culture and in relation to Vertov's artistic response to those changes. In what follows, I hope to show that both the "continuity" and "discontinuity" theses have important merits, but that they need to be thought of in terms of the concrete strategies through which the "avant-gardist" Vertov reacted artistically to the new authoritarian-populist imperatives of early Stalinism. *Three Songs of Lenin* demonstrates that, as far as Vertov was concerned, the most important feature of Stalin-era aesthetic doctrine as it evolved between 1932 and 1936 was its sharp rejection of avant-gardist complexity, anti-humanism and anti-psychologism, and its concomitant turn toward "character," simplicity, and supposedly popular "folk" sentiment. In this essay, I hope to show how Vertov adapted two related features of the new discourse of the 1930s – attention to individual experience, and textual appeals to "folk sensibility" (or *narodnoe tvorchestvo*: "folk creativity") – in ways that, in

*Three Songs of Lenin*, enabled him to fit into the new discursive order while continuing to pursue his old avant-garde concern with the representation of sheer change and dynamism, with material process, and with cinema as a means of reconfiguring perception and spatial-temporal relations. At the same time, I will suggest that “folk” poetic materials incorporated in *Three Songs* functioned for Vertov both as publicly verifiable texts that could satisfy the growing institutional need for some pre-verbalizing of the films, and as “sources” to which he could appeal in order to legitimate his own directorial decisions. It was in *Three Songs of Lenin*, I will argue, that Vertov found a way of accommodating the “populist” and centralizing imperatives of the new 1930s cultural order within his already fully formed, fundamentally constructivist artistic worldview and style.<sup>xxxii</sup>

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Some of the rhetorical specificity of *Three Songs of Lenin* can be pinpointed through a comparative examination of the stylistic use made by that film of Vertov’s own master-trope, namely, the great revolutionary passage from the Old to the New – cinematically conceived in his case not primarily as narrative, but rather as sheer movement and sense of movement, the making-visible of (as Deleuze put it in his superb discussion of Vertov in *Cinema I*) “all the (communist) transitions from an order [that] is being undone to an order [that] is being constructed ... between two systems or two orders, between two movements.”<sup>xxxiii</sup> Vertov was fascinated by the cinematic representation of process, especially processes of long duration, whether natural or historical.

While working on *One Sixth of the World* (1926), his film about (among other things) methods of organizing the exploitation of natural resources, he jotted out plans for exceedingly brief film-sketches, unfortunately never produced, on themes of process, such as “death-putrefaction-renewal-death.” He planned one film that would begin by showing a woman burying her husband, followed by the corpse’s consumption by bacteria and worms, the full conversion of the body into soil, and the emergence of grass out of the soil; a cow would eat the grass, only to be devoured in its turn by a human being, who dies, is buried, and then is absorbed into the whole process again, although the eventual addition of manure into the cycle is shown to generate a kind of productive upward spiral. Another Beckett-like<sup>xxxiv</sup> four-shot film would show a fresh-faced peasant girl – then one wrinkle on her face -- then a bunch of wrinkles – and finally a thoroughly wrinkled old woman. Another featured a man going bald, over the course of three shots.<sup>xxxv</sup>



Image 2: Peasant women dancing “in the round” (from *Kino-Eye* (1924))

The fine internal mechanism of any change is, of course, notoriously hard to explain in any non-regressive way. But transition in Vertov’s cinema is usually something to be *sensed* rather than articulated or explained; and Vertov tries to generate the required perceptual jolts or shifts by making transition as visually and aurally tangible as possible, as in the opening of his first major feature, *Kino-Eye* (1924). The film is about members of the Young Pioneers organization from both the village of Pavlovskaja and from the proletarian Krasnopresnenskaia area of Moscow, and shows the youngsters engaged in philanthropic and leisure activities in various urban and rural settings. *Kino-Eye* begins, as so often in Vertov, with a sequence representative of the Old: here, the jubilant, besotted

dancing of (mainly) women who've had a bit too much to drink during a church holiday. Visually, a dominant circular motif is established gradually but very assertively: circularity links the spinning movements of the women, the circle of the "round dance" itself (Image 2), and objects like the pot, tambourine, and even the faces of the women themselves (Image 3). The ecstatic twirling is both exhilarating and enervating, and, after a while, it starts to suggest that the women are trapped within what Russians would call a "*zamknutyi krug*" (closed circle), although Vertov would resist such aggressive translation of his visual formulae into words. Clearly enough, however, the enormous energy of the women is compelled to inscribe one circle after another, repetition within repetition, creating an image of encompassed and squandered vitality.



Image 3: The circular drum (probably a pot) incorporated into the dance (*Kino-Eye*)

The transition to the New – though we are still very much in the village – occurs across a gap, without any “pivot point” whatsoever. Only an intertitle (“with the village pioneers”) signals any change. However, the material sense of transition is stressed in classic constructivist fashion by a sudden preponderance of rectilinear shapes and movements: beginning with the siding on the building, then the poster pasted on by the Pioneers (Image 4), the picket fence, the waterfall (falling, rolling streaks of water is one of Vertov’s favorite images of revolution), and the straightforward movement of the marching pioneers (Images 5 and 6).



Image 3: The Pioneers arrive with rectilinearity (the sign reads, "Today is the International Day of Cooperation") (*Kino-Eye*)





Image 4: Streaks of water, geometrical form and forward movement (*Kino-Eye*)



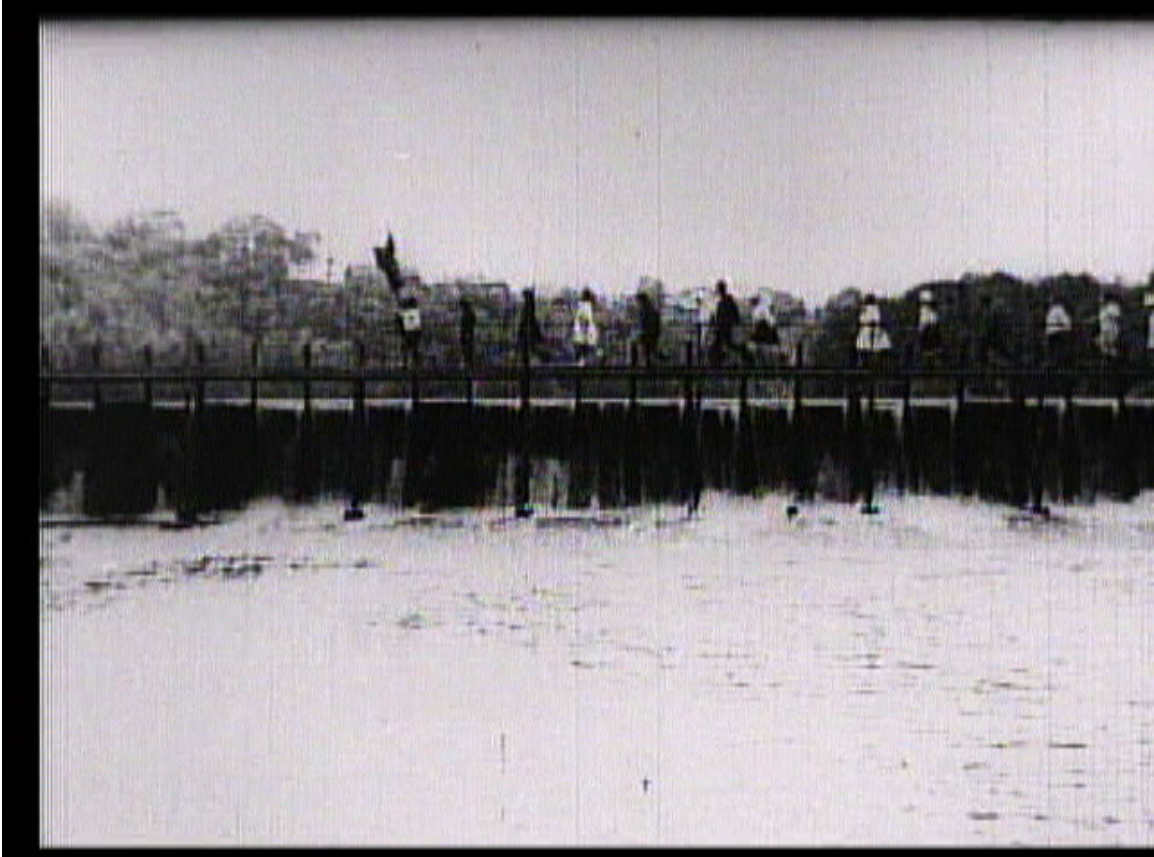


Image 5: The Pioneers marching forward (*Kino-Eye*)

The series culminates with a nearly abstract sequence linking striking overlaps of surging water with the orderly, forward-directed advance of the children, concluding with a demonstration on the main street of the village. Translating again, the message would seem to be: force previously wasted on the inscription of drunken circles is re-channeled (cinematically) into a progressive and architectural rectilinearity; and Vertov hopes to make this “point” by provoking the spectator’s perceptual entry into these two differently patterned spaces.

The same topos is found, in a dizzying variety of permutations, in nearly all of Vertov’s films.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Thus at the end of the prologue to *Man with a Movie Camera* (which contains several such transitions) we see the sudden passage

from the stasis of an orchestra – a traditional kind of artistic collective – thrust into a new kind of motion by the activation of the film projector, inaugurating the film (for the audience *in* the film) that we have already started watching. We find a very striking Vertovian transition in the first reel of *Enthusiasm: Symphony of the Donbass* (1930), a film that can be seen as a grandiose rewriting of *Kino-Eye* in a number of respects. *Enthusiasm* begins with a polemical alternation between scenes of drunken behavior and religious devotion – religion as “opiate of the masses” is the intended message – with the camera mimicking both the repetitive motions of prayer and the aimless stumbling of brawling alcoholics (Image 7). The sense of thudding stagnation intended here is underscored by repeated shots of church bells, shots themselves saturated with repetitive movement and sound.



Image 7: A drunken man staggers to his feet in *Enthusiasm* (1930)

Suddenly, an industrial siren blares, its nearly vertical plume of smoke transected by parallel power lines and garnished by a splash of spontaneous, natural growth (Image 8).<sup>xxxvii</sup>



Image 8: The siren of industrial modernity (*Enthusiasm*)

This siren was apparently shot and recorded using documentary sync sound; thus, the shot serves as a pivot point between old and new, announcing at once the arrival of socialist construction and (on the cinema front) documentary sound film. And once again, this siren blast, seemingly a purely arbitrary cut into the mobile but unprogressive texture of everyday life, is succeeded by the geometrically inflected patterns of a Pioneer parade, now accompanied by documentary sound, with the orderly lines and sharp angles formed by the youngsters matched graphically by the trolley-car tracks across which they march (Image 9).



Image 9: The Pioneers bringing (visual) order to chaos (*Enthusiasm*)

Four years after *Enthusiasm*, and ten years after *Kino-Eye*, with the opening of the first of the “three songs of Lenin,” we see something new emerging in Vertov’s art of transition.<sup>xxxviii</sup> The first song opens with what are probably shots taken in a city in Uzbekistan, possibly Tashkent or Bukhara, showing women wearing the *paranji* and *chachvon* veils (Image 10).



Image 10: The veil (*Three Songs of Lenin* (1934))

It is not unimportant here that it is impossible to tell if the women are looking at the camera or not, and that their gazes are withdrawn. For Vertov, the ability to see is virtually tantamount to the ability to understand and to confront one's oppressor: tantamount to possession of power, in short. It suffices to recall how, in the famous satire on European colonialism in the first reel of *One Sixth of the World*, we get an unforgettable depiction of an African woman "confronting" (though false continuity) her class enemy; or the great sequence in Vertov's next film, *The Eleventh Year* (1928), where at one moment the female "comrade from India" becomes the exemplary witness of the revolutionary collective as a whole. In shaping the rhetoric of *Three Songs*, Vertov could also rely on existing Soviet

discourse on the veil -- discourse well established even before the *hujum* (“assault” on traditional Central Asian customs and taboos) of 1927 – which represented the veil as a kind of imposed blindness. For Soviet agitators (as Gregory Massell puts it),

the implications of freeing a Moslem woman from her veil were far more dramatic than the mere reversal of a physically undesirable condition. It would mean, in effect: to liberate her eyes – “to enable [her] to look at the world with clear eyes,” and not just with unobstructed vision; to liberate her voice, a voice “deaden” by a heavy, shroud-like cover ... to free her from [being] a symbol of perpetual “degradation,” a “symbol of ... silence, timidity ... submissiveness .. humiliation.”<sup>xxxix</sup>

Thus, although (of course) the veil does not blind its wearer in fact, the sequence clearly links veil wearing to blindness, and therefore (in Vertovian logic) powerlessness.

The second shot seems to be a camera-simulation of the motions of prayer, reminiscent of the “drunken camera” in the last reel of *Man with a Movie Camera*, the “praying camera” in *Enthusiasm*, and other moments of camera mimicry in Vertov (Image 11).





Image 11: The “praying camera” in motion (*Three songs of Lenin*)

The lens inscribes a circular movement of rising and prostration that is intended to elicit the idea and the feeling of dull repetition, entrapment, and mindlessness, an impression retroactively confirmed a few shots later when we get an overhead view of men praying.<sup>xi</sup> In some of the succeeding shots, one might read the essentially illegible gestures of the veiled women passing laterally across the screen as evasive, hostile, or indicative of possible interest in the camera. (Historian Sheila Fitzpatrick has shown how important the rhetoric of “tearing off the masks” was during the first 20 years or so of Soviet power; to be sure, Vertovian *kino-pravda* (“film-truth”) participates in its own way in this unmasking project.<sup>xii</sup> Yet these particular veils, of course, were masks thought to have been



clamped onto the women against their will by a male-dominated Islamic society.) A shot of men apparently leaving some kind of domicile, perhaps taken from an implied female point of view, stuck back in the house, is followed by some classic “associative” montage rhetoric incorporating shots of male prayer and of a blind, half-paralyzed woman stumbling down a road. Taken together, the sequence definitively links the veil with blindness, with ignorance and non-enlightenment, with empty ritual, and with misery.



Image 12: The activist making her notes, linking old and new (*Three Songs of Lenin*)

What happens next is truly remarkable within Vertov’s corpus, though it may not appear so at first. The cut to the next shot, accompanied on the soundtrack by a shift from Uzbek music to a proletarian fanfare, yields the

hooded face of a young woman jotting something down by a window; she needs the sunlight, for apparently her home has not yet been “electrified” (Image 12). We are now in Baku, not Uzbekistan, and the woman (not named in the film) is certainly one Aishat Gasanova, a Party activist who worked among women in her native Azerbaidzhan and later in Daghestan.<sup>xlii</sup> Perhaps not immediately, we realize that the “documents” we have just seen are flashbacks or meditations, “interior” to Gasanova’s consciousness, and in the process of being converted into text by the writing hand of Gasanova herself. That we are within the realm of subjectivity is soon confirmed, when the classic Vertovian device of false matchshots – through a window in this case (Image 13) -- opens onto a utopian image of young Pioneers marching through a lush forest next to a stream (Image 14).<sup>xliii</sup>



Image 13: The activist looks into the future (*Three Songs of Lenin*)

From imagining the Old in Uzbekistan, Gasanova turns to the New, still figured by marching young people but (importantly) in a pastoral rather than industrial setting. As in *Kino-Eye* and *Enthusiasm*, though less assertively, Vertov orchestrates a geometrical contrast with the preceding section. The upright bodies rhyme with the birch trees, even as the panning camera stresses lateral dynamism as well as forward movement: all is linear, lucid and forward-directed, as opposed to the clutter and repetition of the previous sequence.



Image 14: Pioneers marching on the riverbank (*Three Songs of Lenin*)

What is new here for Vertov is the unobtrusive inclusion of a subjective, psychological pivot linking the two movements of the passage from the Old to the

New, as opposed to the raw leaps characteristic of his earlier films. Within the rhetoric of the sequence, that is, Gasanova occupies the same place that the impersonal, mechanical siren did at the beginning of *Enthusiasm* – but not without inflecting the sense of the “Old-New” topos in a new, subjectivizing direction. The activist becomes arguably the closest thing to a “character” to be found in any major Vertov film, inasmuch as we are offered a representation, briefly but powerfully sketched, of her daily and emotional life.<sup>xliv</sup> we later see her on her way to the Ali Bairamov club for women, still later her intense participation in a Lenin memorial at the club. This new psychologism was noted, not without smugness, by critics at the time of the release of *Three Songs*, who recalled the director’s early-1920s comments on the “absurdity” of the “psychological Russo-German film-drama – weighed down with apparitions and childhood memories.”<sup>xlv</sup> At a preview on 27 October 1934, critic V. Bartenev noted how Vertov’s old “LEF-type ‘thing-ism’ [*veshchizm*] was overturned by this film,” and that in *Three Songs* “we even see – horror of horrors! – human psychological experience”: “from empiricism [Vertov] has moved to a subjective sensation of the world.”<sup>xlvi</sup>

To be sure, neither Vertov nor his critics were working within a discursive void; as Sheila Fitzpatrick has shown, the celebration of ordinary “working-class heroes,” involving the dissemination of many photographic portraits and interviews, became a major feature of Stalinist culture from the early 1930s onwards.<sup>xlvii</sup> And it is no accident that the majority of Vertov’s later films (whether produced or not) focus on the life stories of exemplary Soviet citizens (women,

mostly), thereby contributing to this large-scale proliferation of biographical celebrations of the “little man and woman.”<sup>xlviii</sup> In neither *Kino-Eye* nor *Enthusiasm* is anyone included in the diegesis as a subjective guarantor of the transition from Old to New; the implication is that, by the time of *Three Songs*, there are such guarantors around, people like Gasanova who have “made” or can imaginatively articulate the passage across the developmental gap.<sup>xlix</sup> Yet it is clear enough that, on the level of style, the insertion of this new psychological “pivot” enabled Vertov to continue his exploration of dynamics – the purely visual materialization of process – in sublimated form.<sup>1</sup>

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Much the same can be said about the mediating function performed by the “folk” material utilized in *Three Songs*, although I would argue that this material performed an important institutional function for Vertov as well, inasmuch as it involved the use of written texts. *Three Songs* was apparently the last film on which Vertov was able to work at least part of the time in his notoriously loose, improvisational, “unscripted” manner. As is well known, Vertov throughout the 1920s took a principled stand against the pre-scripting of films, usually on the grounds that scripts inhibit some more authentically cinematic approach to the organization of visual and sonic material. This stand arguably led him into even more trouble than his notorious taste for quarrel and polemic: he was famously fired from the Central State Cinema Studio in Moscow (Sovkino) in January 1927

in large part because he refused to present studio chief Ilya Trainin with a script for the “scriptless” film he was then working on – a project that eventually became *Man with a Movie Camera*.<sup>li</sup>

With the ascension of the pragmatic anti-avantgardist Boris Shumyatsky to the top of the cinema ministry in 1929, and the liquidation of semi-independent artistic groupings in 1932-33 (and the attendant bureaucratization and centralization), it became impossible for Vertov to maintain this principled anti-script position.<sup>lii</sup> It was with *Three Songs of Lenin* that Vertov made his last real attempt to produce a “scriptless” documentary or, as he preferred to put it, unplayed or non-acted film. He complained loudly to studio administrators about demands for a script even after finally turning in a scenario at an advanced stage in the production (on 23 August 1933 – the film was essentially finished by mid-January 1934):

This is the first time I’ve had to explain a montage construction in words. And when it comes to a film like this one, this is a truly thankless task. ... I have tried to overcome my own objections today, in light of your persistent requests. And so I renounced visuals, sound, the mutual interaction of montage phrases with one another, tonal and rhythmic combinations, expressions of faces and gestures ... that all develop visually and aurally, organically linking together into an idea without the help of intertitles and words. ... To write out each shot in detail, one after the other, link after link, montage phrase after phrase, would make sense, except that it’s far more time-consuming and complex than actually putting the film together. It’s a pity I had to do this.<sup>liiii</sup>

In truth, Vertov had drafted a variety of plans, if not exactly “scripts,” for the film; the early ones had a biographical character and would have brought Vertov to many of Lenin’s European haunts (Zürich, Paris, London and so on) while emphasizing Lenin’s role as leader of the international proletariat.<sup>liiv</sup> As it turned

out, improvements in sync sound recording enabled Vertov to incorporate some directly recorded testimonial material by workers, peasants and engineers, thereby partially circumventing the need for script. At the same time, the core of the scenario that Vertov finally did produce became three so-called “folksongs” about Lenin, selected from among a large number of mostly anonymous Lenin-dedicated verses produced in the Central Asian republics (Tadzhikistan, Turkmenistan, Kirghizstan and Uzbekistan) in and around 1924.

It is well known that a great deal of “folk” (or “pseudo-folk”) culture was generated as the result of official sponsorship in the various national republics, with an intense burst occurring after 1933-4, after *narodnost*’ (“national content,” or “folk sensibility”) had become a valued dimension of the socialist-realist template.<sup>lv</sup> The incorporation of “folk material,” along with the sync sound interviews, were precisely the aspects of *Three Songs* that made the greatest impression on early audiences. In fact, Vertov began to make recourse to “folk” materials only at the very end of 1932, nearly midway through the production,<sup>lvi</sup> and there was no small irony in this “experimental” filmmaker, previously associated (if only informally) with the Left Front of the Arts (LEF), attempting to make his art more accessible by making it “folksier.”<sup>lvii</sup> In later years, Vertov repeatedly spoke of folk material as opening up his personal path to socialist realism, with *Three Songs* as his inaugural success in this area. In an unpublished talk “On Formalism” that he gave on 2 March 1936, he identified “folk creation” as the central weapon in the struggle for “the unity of form and content” against “formalism and naturalism.” Theoretician P.M. Kerzhentsev was

right, Vertov opined, to suggest that “the composer Shostakovich” – recently pilloried in *Pravda* for his *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* – ought to “travel around the Soviet Union collecting the songs of the people,” to discover that “foundation, on the basis of which [he] might grow creatively.”<sup>lviii</sup>

It has been claimed that much of the “folk” writing produced in the Soviet period was more-or-less pure fabrication, done by professional writers working in Moscow and the republican capitals. Vertov’s “songs,” however, seem to have a more banal origin: most likely, they were penned in the mid-1920s by young people associated with worker’s or women’s clubs or the Komsomol (Young Communist Youth League) organization – that is, in settings where Lenin was frequently commemorated, and the production of memorial verses and songs was encouraged (one might look to our own “essay contests” linked to various national or state holidays for an analogue). These poems were collected, and sometimes appeared on the pages of major central newspapers like *Pravda*.<sup>lix</sup>

Thus we needn’t spend much time worrying about the authenticity of these “folk” productions as folk productions; clearly, the important thing is that they were examples of anonymous, “naïve” poetry, and could thus at once be presented as documents of popular sentiment while cohering (inasmuch as they were *documents*) with Vertov’s own kino-eye “life-as-it-is” precepts.<sup>lx</sup> As scripts or components of scripts, they were texts bearing “folk” legitimacy that could be presented to studio administrators to give them a sense of his direction; they were also collections of images, often (at least in the examples selected by



Vertov) images of very physical, elemental, seasonal character, and thus adaptable to his established *faktura* practices.

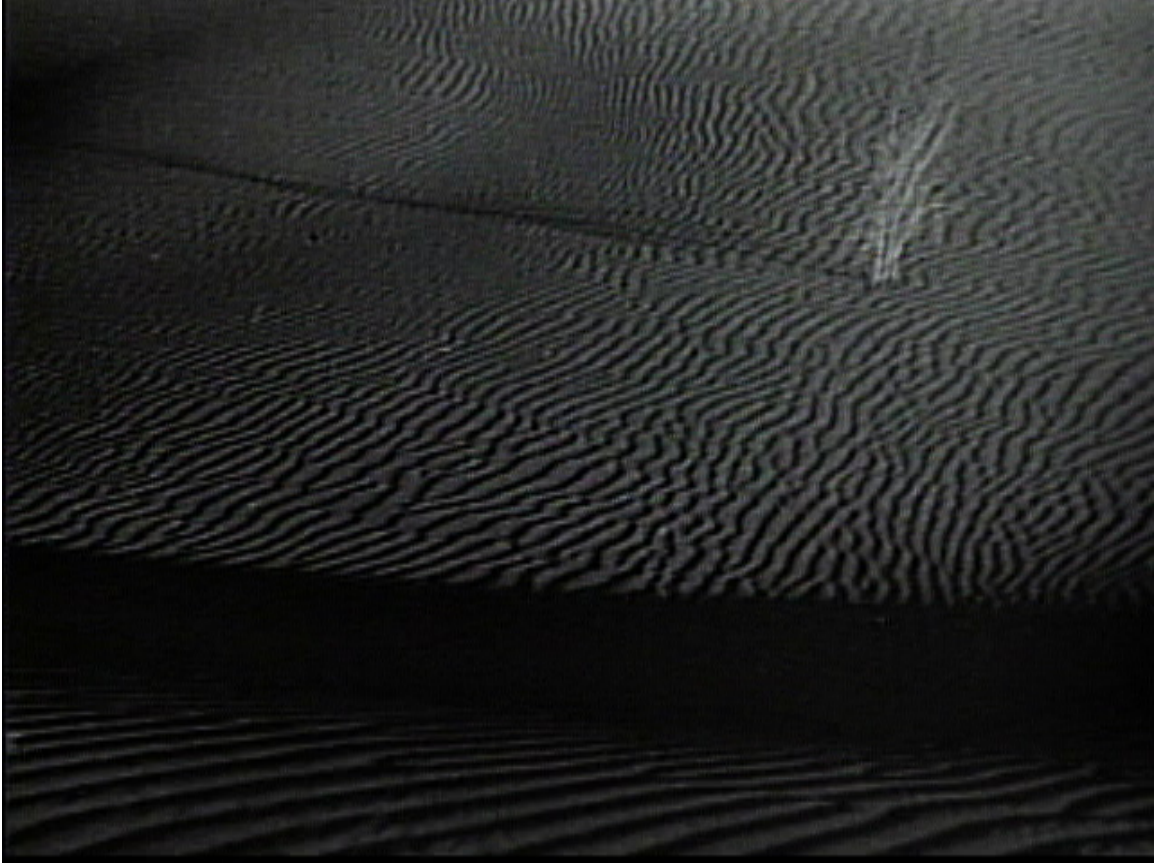


Image 15: The immobile Kara-Kum desert, near the beginning of the third song (*Three Songs of Lenin*)

An example is this anonymous “Kirghiz Song,” the main text in the third of the three songs:

In Moscow, in a big stone city,  
 Where those chosen by the people gathered,  
 There is a nomad's tent on a square,  
 And in it Lenin lies.  
 If you have great sadness,  
 And nothing comforts you,  
 Go up to this tent,  
 And look upon Lenin,  
 And your woe will disperse like water

And your sadness float away like leaves in an *aryk* [stream or canal].<sup>lxi</sup>

In *Three Songs* itself, this movement from sadness to “flow” and dispersal occurs in the best Vertov style, as the vast, nearly unmoving expanse of the Kara-Kum desert, rippling with suppressed energy (Image 15), gives way to motion and flow (catalyzed by Lenin’s mausoleum (the “tent”)); what was frozen and locked-in suddenly becomes a multi-branched stream linking marchers (Image 16), mass produced texts (specifically, copies of Lenin’s works rolling off the assembly line), and eventually irrigative water as such (Image 17). Now, however, the formal representation of change is motivated, perhaps even justified, by the “people’s” own words.



Image 16: The double-flow of marchers into the mausoleum (*Three Songs of Lenin*)

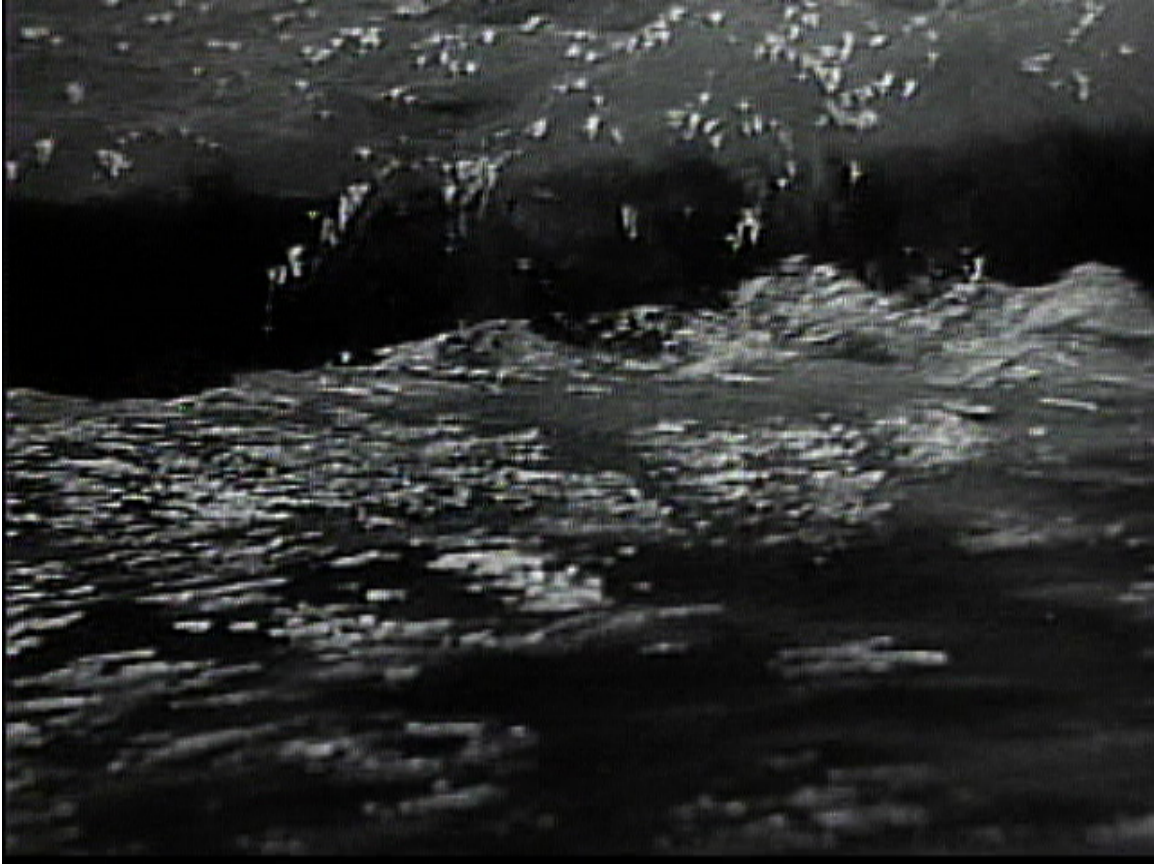


Image 17: The core image of the sequence: water (*Three Songs of Lenin*)

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We have already suggested historical reasons for Vertov's adoption of character and folklore in *Three Songs*. Two final and related questions concern the respective places of Lenin and Stalin in the film, and how we might account for the film's actual appeal (repeatedly attested by early viewers) to its contemporary audiences. Noël Burch was correct, I think, when he wrote that, "among the Soviet masters, Dziga Vertov alone advocated an uncompromising tabula rasa."<sup>lxii</sup> I interpret this phrase to mean not only that Vertov was (as Malevich saw) drawn to a cinema of near-abstract dynamism in contrast to more theatrically-based contemporaries like Eisenstein, but was committed to a

translation of politically revolutionary radicalism into cinema, a translation that would require not only a purgation from literary and theatrical dross but a rebuilding of cinema from some presumed ground-level of perception. (Perhaps the destruction of the Civil War, leading to very palpable “levelings” of all sorts, helped condition this attitude as well.) In part, this is what accounts for critics at the time decried as Vertov’s “infantilism,” his frequent reinventions of the wheel, carried out as though all the established resources of cinema had to be accumulated again and reconfigured.<sup>lxiii</sup> And Vertov seemed truly to believe that these sorts of renovations of vision would have a virtually immediate political effect:

Gradually, through comparison of various parts of the globe, various bits of life, the visible world is being explored. .... Millions of workers, having recovered their sight, are beginning to doubt the necessity of supporting the bourgeois structure of the world.<sup>lxiv</sup>

But with the move to full-scale “socialist construction” in 1929 and the massive production of “Soviet” subjectivities, more efficacious, less implacably corporeal mechanisms for configuring the “revolutionary passage” for Soviet citizens was required. For Vertov, these new mechanisms were precisely the subjective trajectories of biographical individuals and the lure of folk authenticity, into whose vocabularies the raw material-perceptual transitions and leaps of earlier avant-garde *faktura* could be translated. Now, passages between old and new that had previously been represented in a non-“humanist” (or even “non-human”) manner were recoded in terms that invited sympathy and subjective investment; the

material relationship between the static and the active slowly mutated into a narrative-figural one, like the relationship between promise and fulfillment. If Vertov's work of the 1920s had mobilized material dynamics as both a figure for and a way of effecting (on a perceptual level) revolution, the films of the 1930s, typified by *Three Songs*, insert two additional mediating levels: revolution as a personal, biographical trajectory (or what medieval Christian hermeneutics would call the "moral" level of interpretation), and a new base-stratum of presentiment of revolution, as expressed in folksong (or what those same medieval allegorists would call the "literal" level). This new "machinery for ideological investment," to use Fredric Jameson's phrase, is thus arguably more complex as an *ideological* structure than what we find in Vertov's work of the 20s; a diagram of its significant layers, in accord with the four medieval exegetical levels, would look like this:<sup>lxv</sup>

Anagogical (collective, historical destiny; communism)

Moral (the individual process of becoming "new," "Soviet": psychology)

Allegorical (the perceptual-somatic revolution; modernizing of the senses)

Literal (here, folk poetry and music, with its utopian imagery: narodnoe

tvorchestvo)

In other words, the desires for change expressed in folk poetry ("your woe will disperse like water": the historically prior or "literal" level) can also *mean* a desire for world-historical socialist transformation (the anagogical level), a desire which can also *be expressed* in terms of individual progress toward revolutionary

consciousness (the moral level); and all of these levels can find *representation*, if properly articulated, in the “pure dynamics” of cinema (the allegorical level).

Unsurprisingly, such figurative reading was indeed characteristic of the discourse of the '30s. We find a rather painful example of Vertov's own allegorizing in a article he wrote about *Three Songs* in 1935, where after noting that he structured one section of the “second song” in accord with the cadences of folk poetry (“through fire/yet they go/they fall/yet they go/they die/yet they go/the masses who won the Civil War/that is Ilich-Lenin”), he goes on to argue that precisely the same passage from defeat to victory characterizes “the revolution in the consciousnesses of the workers on the White Sea Canal.”<sup>lxvi</sup> This canal project, in fact a brutal Gulag-style forced labor enterprise built between 1931 and 1933, was widely publicized as (and indeed, thought by many to *be*) as a grand reform-through-work venture, a disciplinary mechanism for the creation of Soviet citizens.<sup>lxvii</sup>

These grim motifs bring us back, at long last, to the role of Stalin in the film, and, by extension, that of Lenin. It seems best to assert that the Lenin of *Three Songs* functions as a kind of guarantor of the ultimate mutual inter-translatability of the four levels indicated above. Lenin is at once the exemplary revolutionary person (moral), the great theorist of communism and founder of the USSR (anagogical), and a folk hero to the “people” (literal);<sup>lxviii</sup> as the great “electrifier” or modernizer of the country, he can be assimilated to the more properly Vertovian “allegorical” level as well. But what of Stalin, who, as we know, was prominently on view throughout the film? Paradoxically enough, my

analysis suggests, I think, that “Stalin” was not especially essential to the overall structure and rhetoric of *Three Songs of Lenin*. Judging from the contemporary reviews (whether Soviet or otherwise), he seems in fact to have made very little impression; few mentioned him at all, and very few seemed to regard his role as an essential part of the “meaning” of the film. In truth, this is unsurprising, for Stalin in *Three Songs* neither “replaces” Lenin nor comes to occupy the pole of the “New” (as opposed to Lenin’s “Old”). Inasmuch as Stalin is shown “continuing the work” of Lenin, he is like everyone else in the film; inasmuch as he “fulfills” Lenin’s directives, he remains decidedly secondary to the primary model (and the original film, I should add, apparently contained no folksong references to Stalin, though it certainly could have included them). Most importantly, the very allegorical structure of the film, fusing folk collective, individuals, historical destiny and cinematic *faktura* explorations into a single “Leninist” revolutionary paradigm, absolutely precludes a central tenet of the (in 1934, already dominant) Stalin cult: namely, that Stalin was “the intermediary between Lenin and the people,” that through “Stalin’s works, writings, and person Lenin’s spirit was accessible to all.”<sup>lxi</sup> Whether in 1934 or 1970, *Three Songs of Lenin* argues, on the contrary, that “Lenin” is in some sense omnipresent and immanent in discourse, historical action, and artistic practice alike. (Was this the feature that made the 1938 reedit of the film – which includes a speech by Stalin about Lenin – necessary?)<sup>lxx</sup>

We should not be tempted to think that this rhetorical sidelining of Stalin occurred because of some conscious “dissident” impulse on Vertov’s part (of which there is no evidence in any case).<sup>lxxi</sup> Rather, it emerged out of Vertov’s



effort to preserve a space for his established artistic practice, even while creating an “accessible” and politically useful work. Thus we might see his work on *Three Songs* as a form of preservative figuration or *allegoresis*, a way of saving the old forms, as the Neoplatonist Porphyry did with his philosophical allegory of the Homeric “cave of the nymphs,” for example, by rereading them as versions of some newly legitimated brand of knowledge.<sup>lxxii</sup> That an avantgardist would need to preserve his beloved forms not through appeal to new science or philosophy but to “the folk” and “subjectivities” may be one feature that makes the story of Vertov’s own creative passage from the Old of the 20s to the New of the 30s, a peculiarly Soviet one.

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<sup>i</sup> A note on the English translation of the original title (*Tri Pesni o Lenine*): strictly speaking, the most obvious translation of the pronoun “o” in the title is “about” rather than “of,” and indeed the title *Three Songs about Lenin* has been offered both in articles and in exhibition contexts (as the title of the Kino Video DVD of the film, for instance). English-language writers have been inconsistent about the title from the beginning, however; in his review for the *Guardian* (24 November 1934, p. 11), Huntly Carter calls the film *Three Songs on Lenin!* For my part, I would endorse the title *Three Songs of Lenin* on generic grounds. The film is a “film-poem,” after all, and the translated title should render that hint of “epic” archaism, on an analogy with titles like *The Song of Roland*, *The Lay of Igor’s Campaign*, and so on; the flat literalism of “*Three Songs about Lenin*” misses this important nuance.

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<sup>ii</sup> *Three Songs of Lenin* was commissioned in late 1931, about two years in advance of the projected 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemoration of the Soviet leader's death in 1924. The film's extraordinarily troubled production history had a happy ending for Vertov; he received the Order of the Red Star for his achievements in cinema (and for his work on *Three Songs* in particular) in January 1935 (see Lev Roshal', *Dziga Vertov* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1982), p. 237). Interestingly, the Red Star was a military award; Vertov was apparently a reservist during this period (he was called before a military commissariat while making *Three Songs* (on 10 February 1934), but got a deferment), which perhaps explains why he received a military rather than civilian honor (RGALI (Russian State Archive of Literature and Art) f. 2091, op. 2, d. 423, l. 14). In the numbered references that follow to materials in the Vertov archive, I use the following standard abbreviation system, utilized at RGALI itself: f. (archive, "fond"); op. (list or inventory, "opis"); d. (file, "delo"); l. (page, "list").

<sup>iii</sup> Vertov was already showing rushes of the film by ca. 15 January 1934 (RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 423, ll. 93-94), and was soon complaining bitterly (through May 1934) about the refusal of Mezhrabpomfil'm administrator who was later associated with the Lenin Museum, to release it (RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 423, ll. 94ob, 119). However, it appears virtually certain that the original film's "third song" contained the shots -- present in the 1970 reedit as well -- of the triumphal arrival of the rescued members of the abortive "Cheliuskin" polar exhibition; see RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 274, l. 22. This material could not have been incorporated earlier than April 1934.

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<sup>iv</sup> This festival marked one of the first great exhibitions of “new Soviet cinema” in the West; among the films shown (sometimes only as excerpts) were Dovzhenko’s *Ivan*, Boris Barnet’s *Outskirts*, Aleksandr Ptushko’s *New Gulliver*, and Grigori Alexandrov’s *Happy Guys* (see “Vostorzhennye otzyvy: Ogoromnyi uspekh sovetskikh fil’mov v Venetsii,” *Komsomol’skaia Pravda* (196) 23.8.34). Vertov fought desperately to attend the festival, but was unable to get permission to go (RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 423, ll. 26-30).

<sup>v</sup> Apparently, *Three Songs* was pre-screened in the Donbass city of Kramatorsk on the occasion of the opening of the enormous machine-building plant there on 28 September 1934; see Gurevich, “Segodnia – Torzhestvennyi Pusk Kramatorskogo Zavoda: Nakanune Puska,” *Izvestiia* 228 (28 September 1934) and RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 274, l. 63. The film was shown as far away as Ufa, Semipalatinsk and Tashkent, and received a New York release as well (after a shot of a woman breastfeeding her child was removed: see letter of New York State Department of Education to Amkino Corp., 3 November 1934 (housed in Anthology Film Archives)) in November; it was reviewed favorably in both the *New York Times* and the *Herald Tribune* (RGALI f. 2091, op. 1, d. 93, l. 100).

<sup>vi</sup> See in particular Vij, “Pisatel’ i fil’m” [on Wells’ reaction to the film], *Kino Gazeta* (35) 4 August 1934; S. Roger, “Un beau film de Dziga Vertoff: *Trois Chants Sur Lenine*,” *Le Journal de Moscou* (15) 18 August 1934. *Pravda* published numerous articles that either discussed or mentioned the film, always positively – including a major piece by D. Osipov on 23 July 1934, with stills from the film (“Kinopoema o Lenine,” p. 4), but also on 16 September and 10, 20, and

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24 November 1934, and 11 January, 6, 21 and 27 February, and 2 March 1935 -- contrary to what has recently been claimed (see Oksana Bulgakowa, "Spatial Figures in Soviet Cinema of the 1930s," in *The Landscape of Stalinism: The Art and Ideology of Soviet Space* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2003), p. 75). The group photo of the winners of the cinema prizes (including Vertov, who won his prize for *Three Songs*) was actually the cover photo of *Pravda* on 28 February 1935.

<sup>vii</sup> RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 423, ll. 52-53. Certainly, the film was shown, in some form or other, in cities all over the Soviet Union through at least to 1 May 1935 (RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 274, l. 361).

<sup>viii</sup> See Aleksandr Deriabin, "*Three Songs of Lenin*," *23<sup>rd</sup> Pordenone Silent Film Festival Catalogue* (Sacile: Giornate del Cinema Muto, 2004), p. 75. On the differences between the 1938 version and the (now lost) 1934 and 1935 original versions, see below.

<sup>ix</sup> See, for example, his use of *Three Songs* as a defense against charges of "cosmopolitanism" during the notorious anti-Semitic campaign of the late '40s-early 50's (RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 222, ll. 3-4).

<sup>x</sup> Aleksandr Fevral'skii, "Tri Pesni o Lenine" [reprinted from *Literaturnaia Gazeta* (89) 16 July 1934], in Ippolit Sokolov, ed., *Istoriia Sovetskogo Kinoiskustva Zvukovogo Perioda* (Moscow: Goskinoizdat, 1946), vol. 1, pp. 67-70.

<sup>xi</sup> See *Komsomol'skaia Pravda* 22 March 1960, and RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 274, l. 1037.

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<sup>xii</sup> *Tri Pesni o Lenine*, ed. E.I. Vertova-Svilova and V.I. Furtichev (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1971).

<sup>xiii</sup> See, for example, Denise J. Youngblood's evaluation of the film's third section as "almost fascistic in its treatment of the People and the Leader and in its emphasis on the human body. This abysmal film marked the bitter end of the career of a great and original director whose artistic politics helped shape the cinema debates of a decade. *Three Songs of Lenin* is typical of what the Soviet 'documentary' would become" (*Soviet Cinema in the Silent Era, 1918-1935* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1985), p. 230).

<sup>xiv</sup> On this, see Nina Tumarkin, *Lenin Lives! The Lenin Cult in Soviet Russia*, revised edition (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 252-254.

<sup>xv</sup> Vii, "Pisatel' i fil'ma," *Kino Gazeta* (35) 4 August 1934; RGALI f. 2091, op. 1, d. 93, l. 24. The prominence of Stalin in the film's last section is confirmed by other reviewers; e.g., "The third song is the song of today – the swelling, triumphant song of socialist construction, of the continuation of the work started by Lenin and now carried ever further by the Leninist party under the leadership of Stalin" (Lars Moen, "*Three Songs About Lenin: A New Kind of Film Portraying Great Achievement*," *Moscow Daily News* (181) 6 August 1934; RGALI f. 2091, op. 1, d. 93, l. 31).

<sup>xvi</sup> T. Rokotov, "Tri Pesni o Lenine," *Vechernaia Moskva* (255) 4 November 1934; RGALI f. 2091, op. 1, d. 93, l. 89.

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<sup>xvii</sup> Although it was clearly added at a fairly late date in the production: RGALI f. 2091, op. 1, d. 48, l. 17.

<sup>xviii</sup> Rokotov, op. cit.

<sup>xix</sup> V. Ivanov, "Tri Pesni o Lenine," *Rabochaia Penza* 286 (31 December 1934); RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 274, l. 22.

<sup>xx</sup> One of the most widely distributed publications on which this photo appeared as a cover image, Stalin's booklet *About Lenin*, was likely on Vertov's desk as he was preparing *Three Songs*, inasmuch as direct quotations from it appear with some frequency in his notes for the film: e.g., "departing from us, comrade Lenin bequeathed to us the duty of holding high and preserving the purity of the great calling of Party member; we swear to you, comrade Lenin, that we will carry out your commandment with honor," a well-known refrain from Stalin's funeral speech for Lenin of 26 January 1924 (*O Lenine* (Moscow: Molodaia Gvardiia, 1932), pp. 1-2) and jotted down by Vertov on 3 December 1933 (RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 246, l. 41).

<sup>xxi</sup> RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 423, l. 47.

<sup>xxii</sup> RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 423, ll. 65-68, here 66. It seems that Vertov prepared this "sound passport" in part for the film's exhibition in Venice, to ensure that the sound was projected properly (RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 423, l. 28).

<sup>xxiii</sup> Much more could be said about the relationships between the various versions, though this is not the place to engage in a full-scale comparison. The notorious 1938 "Stalinized" sound version was essentially augmented by a long, dull speech by Stalin (about Lenin) in the final reel, more footage of various

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luminaries in the Stalinist hierarchy (e.g., Voroshilov, Ezhov), and by shots relating to the Spanish Civil War (e.g., of Dolores Ibárruri (“La Passionaria”) delivering a speech); much of the same Spanish material appeared in Vertov’s *Lullaby* (1937), and at least some was retained in the 1970 reedit. The 1938 *Three Songs* was also abbreviated by the exclusion of now-repressed “enemies of the people” who had appeared in the original (such as Marshal Tukhachevskii (RGALI f. 2091, op. 1, d. 48, ll. 9, 16)).

<sup>xxiv</sup> See, for example, the cover of *Pravda* for 7 November 1934 (the 17<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the October Revolution), with its side-by-side portraits of Lenin and Stalin, among scores of other examples.

<sup>xxv</sup> Klaus Kanzog, “Internalisierte Religiosität: Elementarstrukturen der visuellen Rhetorik in Dziga Vertovs *Drei Lieder über Lenin*,” in *Apparatur und Rhapsodie: Zu den Filmen des Dziga Vertov*, ed. Natascha Drubek-Meyer and Jurij Murashov (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2000), p. 218.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Annette Michelson, “The Kinetic Icon and the Work of Mourning: Prolegomena to the Analysis of a Textual System,” in *The Red Screen: Politics, Society, Art in Soviet Cinema*, ed. Anna Lawton (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 119, 129.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Bulgakowa, op. cit., p. 59.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Mariano Prunes, “Dziga Vertov’s *Three Songs about Lenin* (1934): A Visual Tour through the History of the Soviet Avant-Grade in the Interwar Years,” *Criticism* 45:2 (2003): 251-78; here 274. Prunes focuses primarily on the co-presence of differing approaches to still photography in *Three Songs*, but much

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of what he says holds true for the relationship between *Three Songs* and earlier Vertov works. The 1925 *Lenin Kino-Pravda*, for instance, provides the clear template for important features of the “mourning” sequence in the second of the three songs (entitled “We Loved Him”).

<sup>xxix</sup> Prunes, op. cit., p. 272.

<sup>xxx</sup> Michelson, op. cit, p. 129.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Bulgakowa, op. cit., p. 59.

<sup>xxxii</sup> The perceptive Aleksandr Fevral'skii, reviewing *Three Songs* prior to its release in November 1934, concluded by noting how the film “affirms the art of socialist realism, thereby showing that even within a story-less cinema (which is not to say without theme or topic), socialist realism can find sufficiently vivid expression” (“Tri pesni o Lenine,” in *Literaturnaia Gazeta* 89 (16 July 1934); cited in *Istoriia Sovetskogo Kinoiskusstva Zvukovogo Perioda*, vol. I, ed. I.V. Sokolov (Moscow: Goskinoizdat, 1946), p. 70).

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 39. All of Deleuze’s comments on Vertov here (especially pp. 39-40 and 82) are of the greatest interest.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> I am thinking here of a play like *Breath* (1969).

<sup>xxxv</sup> RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 235, ll. 3-6.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> The intriguing, vitally important exception seems to be *One Sixth of the World* (1926).



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<sup>xxxvii</sup> The idea of revolution as a “socialist springtime” was an important one, especially during the years of the first Five Year Plan (1928-32); the trope partially informs Mikhail Kaufman’s great *In Spring* (1929).

<sup>xxxviii</sup> In the analysis of *Three Songs* that follows, I will be relying on sections of the 1970 reedit – the only version readily available outside of Russia – that correspond, to the best of my knowledge, to the original 1934 sound version in all essentials.

<sup>xxxix</sup> Gregory J. Massell, *The Surrogate Proletariat: Moslem Women and Revolutionary Strategies in Soviet Central Asia, 1919-1929* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 138. The Soviets themselves were borrowing, of course, from a long Euro-American tradition of incorporating, in Leila Ahmed’s words, “the peculiar practices of Islam with respect to women” into “the Western narrative of the quintessential otherness and inferiority of Islam” (*Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 149.

<sup>xl</sup> These rapid re-focalizations are a striking feature of *Three Songs*. Apparently simple in its structure as compared with the late silent features, in fact one often finds the whole relation between spectator, camera and observed object changing from one shot to the next, without intermediate steps. Vertov himself said that it was the most complexly edited of his films.

<sup>xli</sup> “Tear off each and every mask from reality” had been the slogan of the proletarian writers’ group RAPP, a group toward which Vertov was in fact profoundly hostile (the feeling was mutual). Interestingly, “the RAPP leader,

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Leopold Averbakh, took the slogan from Lenin's comment that the 'realism of [Lev] Tolstoy was the tearing off of each and every mask'" (Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Tear off the Masks! Identity and Imposture in Twentieth-Century Russia* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 65).

<sup>xliii</sup> Vertov writes of Gasanova and of filming her at her home in his working notes for the film: RGALI f. 2091, op. 1, d. 48, 5, and op. 2, d. 66, ll. 41-46. See A.I. Gasanova, *Raskreposhchenie zhenshchiny-gorianki v Dagestane (1920-1940 gg.)* (Makhachkala: Institut imeni G. Tsadasy, 1963); and *Podgotovka zhenskikh kadrov v Dagestane i ikh rol' v khoziastvennom i kul'turnom razvitii respubliki (1945-1965 gg.)* (Makhachkala: Institut imeni G. Tsadasy, 1969). The script for the film refers to her as "Mel'kiu"; see *Iz naslediia. tom pervyj: Dramaturgicheskie opyty*, ed. A.S. Deriabin (Moscow: Eizenshtein-Tsentr, 2004, pp. 170-171).

<sup>xliiii</sup> The setting would seem to be central-Russian, although a closer look at the marching Pioneers suggests that they are of Central Asian ethnicity; Vertov described their musical theme as the "eastern Pioneer march."

<sup>xliv</sup> Gasanova's strongest competitor in this respect is Maria Belik, whose sync sound interview appears in the third of the three songs. The female radio-listener who eventually appears sculpting a Lenin bust in the first section of *Enthusiasm* – a woman referred to as "Tasia" in Vertov's notes for the film (RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 239, l. 75ob) – is a minor precursor; the "man with a movie camera" incarnated by Mikhail Kaufman in the film of that name is another obvious "protagonist," although he does not, to my mind, emerge as a subjectivized character in any significant sense. To be sure, full-fledged characters do appear

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in Vertov's later work, realized and unrealized; the married couple at the center of *To You, Front!* (1942) is probably the apotheosis here.

<sup>xlv</sup> *Kino-Eye*, p. 5.

<sup>xlvi</sup> RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 423, l. 37. The turn to "humanism" was a characteristic of cultural discourse at the time; see the self-critical speech by former LEF-ist Viktor Shklovsky at the first Congress of Soviet Writers, "In the Name of the New Humanism" (*Izvestia* 24 August 1934 (p. 3)).

<sup>xlvii</sup> "The newspapers ran many stories on the extraordinary achievements of ordinary people, whose photographs, serious or smiling, looked out from the front page" (Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 74). This trend intensified with the "Stakhanovite" movement that began in 1935: "Stakhanovites' photographs were published in the newspapers; journalists interviewed them about their achievements and opinions .... [they] were also celebrated for their *individual* achievements and encouraged to show their individuality and leadership potential" (ibid.; Fitzpatrick's emphasis).

<sup>xlviii</sup> The culmination of this tendency is certainly Vertov's *Lullaby* (1937), which continually links celebratory footage of Soviet "reality" (parades, speeches and so on) with various implied subjectivities – in many cases, those of children and even infants. Much of Vertov's later work offers similar focus on "personalities"; see, for instance, *Three Heroines* (1938), about the famous women aviators Valentina Grizodubova, Polina Osipenko, and Marina Raskova. As a qualification, it is worthwhile adding that "testimonial" writing, whether in prose or

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poetry, had a major role to play in the gradual development of the cult of Lenin from the very beginning (1924). Nina Tumarkin singles out Grigori Zinoviev's citation of workers' writings about Lenin as imparting to Zinoviev's tributes a demonstrably more galvanizing effect on his audiences than that exerted by other Party leaders. One of the writings was a letter, "written by a miner, [and began] in a traditional folk idiom – 'the sun has grown dim; the star has disappeared' – and reads like a folk tale. [. . .] In reading this story Zinoviev was [saying] that Lenin had become, for the narod [common people] a leader of enormous stature, a prophet, and a savior" (*Lenin Lives! The Lenin Cult in Soviet Russia*, p. 155).

<sup>xlix</sup> Critics have been right to notice that the autoreferential Vertov likes to represent ideal viewers and exemplary subjects in his films; it is less often recognized that the majority of these viewers and subjects are women. Without getting into the very large topic of Vertov's feminism in general (about which I can say almost nothing of substance here), it should be mentioned that, in *Three Songs*, the images and voices of women are given a crucial historically "connective" role differentiating them from what we find in the earlier films. Even after the veil is tossed away and modernity has been embraced, women in *Three Songs* continue to be shown in "native dress," participating in "folk celebrations" – one female bard is shown competing against a man in a *dutar*-playing contest – thus making visible that ideal link between national and Soviet identity promoted by the official ideology.

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<sup>i</sup> What I am claiming here needs to be augmented by Annette Michelson's brilliant observation that, in *Three Songs*, Vertov's exploration of cinematic time and space becomes psychologized as the "working-through" of Lenin's death: "Vertov's deployment of the cinematic anomalies, the optical panoply of slow motion, of stretch printing, looping, the freeze-frame, reverse motion, originally constituted as an arsenal in the assault upon the conditions and ideology of cinematic representation ... are now deployed as an admittedly powerful instrument in that labor of repetition, deceleration, distension, arrest, release and fixation which characterize the work of mourning" (Michelson, op. cit., p. 129).

<sup>ii</sup> He later made the film at the VUFKU (Ukrainian) studio (released 1929).

<sup>iii</sup> To give the devil his due, it's not hard to imagine why, given the limited resources for film and all the political pressures of the day, the bureaucrats in charge of the film industry were skeptical of Vertov's preferred approach. They feared that it would lead to inefficiency on the production level and to a "lack of ideological orientation" within the film itself; for both these inadequacies, needless to say, the bureaucrats themselves would have borne ultimate responsibility.

<sup>iiii</sup> RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 423, p. 4. Mezhrabpomfil'm was the studio that produced *Three Songs*. The note was addressed to Mezhrabpomfil'm administrator Babitskii.

<sup>lv</sup> RGALI f. 2091, op. 1, d. 50, ll. 1-12.

<sup>lv</sup> See Hans Gunther, "Totalitarnaia narodnost' i ee istoki," *Sotsrealisticheskii Kanon*, ed. Hans Gunther and Evgeny Dobrenko (St. Petersburg:

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Akademicheskii Proekt, 2000), 377-389; and Frank J. Miller, *Folklore for Stalin: Russian Folklore and Pseudofolklore of the Stalin Era* (Armonk, NY and London: M.E. Sharpe, 1990), pp. 7-13.

<sup>lvi</sup> *Tri Pesni o Lenine*, ed. E.I. Vertova-Svilova and V.I. Furtichev (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1971), p. 107. An itinerary plan for the film under the working title “About Lenin” from August 1932 contains no hint of any structuring “folk” content (RGALI f. 2091, op. 1, d. 50, ll. 1-12).

<sup>lvii</sup> LEF had been deeply hostile to folk art, seeing in it (in Frank Miller’s words) “a worthless remnant of a patriarchal society, a cart that should be replaced by a truck” (*Folklore for Stalin*, p. 6).

<sup>lviii</sup> RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 212, l. 8. The famous article “Muddle Instead of Music” appeared in *Pravda* on 28 January 1936.

<sup>lix</sup> One section of text from the “first song,” beginning with the line “We never saw him,” is actually an excerpt that appeared in *Pravda* (“Vostochnyi epos,” 22 April 1927, p. 3) from a longer verse called “The Death of Lenin” by the “Komsomol member Atabaev”; the poem had been written down in Kanibadam, Tadzhikistan in March 1925 (RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 422, l. 14). Although Vertov did collect poetic texts and record folk musical performances *in situ* in Central Asia and Azerbaidzhan, it seems likely that much of the poetic material out of which he culled the “three songs” came from sources in Moscow such as possibly the *Pravda* offices, where his friend Mikhail Kol’tsov worked.

<sup>lx</sup> Vertov wrote as much in a diary note from 1936: “The same impulse that had once prompted me to collect doggerel verse awoke again within me [during the

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production of *Three Songs*]. In the first place, these were song-documents; as is well known, I have always had great interest in the arsenal of documentary” (*Tri Pesni o Lenine*, ed. E.I. Vertova-Svilova and V.I. Furtichev (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1971), p. 107).

<sup>lxi</sup> “Written down in Kirghiz-Kishlak, Fergana region, in February 1926” (RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 422, l. 26).

<sup>lxii</sup> Noël Burch, “Film’s Institutional Mode of Representation and the Soviet Response,” *October 11* (Winter 1979): 93.

<sup>lxiii</sup> At a meeting of the kinocs in 1923, Vertov spoke of the need for the “abrogation of literary trash” in the following terms: “The productive resources of cinema need to be purged, in a manner analogous to a purge of the Communist Party [of which Vertov was never a member], to renounce all of its harmful and enervating components in the name of its full recovery and victorious growth” (RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 390, l. 6).

<sup>lxiv</sup> *Kino-Eye*, p. 39.

<sup>lxv</sup> My reading here is based on Jameson’s comments on medieval exegesis in *The Political Unconscious*, although the anagogical level occupies a somewhat different place in my analysis: “[I]t is precisely in [the generation of the moral and anagogical levels] that the individual believer is able to ‘insert’ himself or herself (to use the Althusserian formula), it is precisely by way of the *moral* and *anagogical* interpretations that the textual apparatus is transformed into a ‘libidinal apparatus,’ a machinery for ideological investment” (*The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University

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Press, 1981), 30). For medieval exegetes, the literal level is the Old Testament (especially the story of the Exodus); the allegorical is the New Testament (especially the life of Christ); the moral, the tale of the “redemption” of the individual believer; and the anagogical, the eventual historical destiny of all mankind in the Second Coming and Last Judgment. It needs to be stressed (to avoid all misunderstanding) that Jameson’s analysis is an attempt to understand the ideological effectiveness of certain textual constructs, not an advocacy of medieval Christian hermeneutics as an interpretive method. By the same token, my use of Jameson’s interpretation is meant to indicate the kind of *ideological* work *Three Songs* is performing, not that Vertov is adopting a “religious” framework in any explicit way.

<sup>lxvi</sup>“Poslednii opyt,” *Literaturnaia Gazeta* (18 January 35): n.p. A well-known “History of the Construction of White Sea-Baltic Canal” was edited by Maksim Gor’kii (1934), and contained contributions by Shklovsky and Zoshchenko among others.

<sup>lxvii</sup> See Mikhail Morukov, “The White Sea-Baltic Canal,” in *The Economics of Forced Labor: The Soviet Gulag*, ed. Paul R. Gregory and Valery Lazarev (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2003), pp. 151-162. Vertov actually received permission to film a documentary about the project on 25 February 1934, but this film apparently never got off the ground (RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 247, l. 103ob).

<sup>lxviii</sup> In his working notes for the film, Vertov included the following quotation from *Pravda*, 22 April 1927: “In the stories, songs and tales of the peoples of the East, Lenin is characterized as a *bogatyr*’ [folkloric prince] who has expanded into a



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hero for all humanity and raised a holy war against the rich, the violent, the insulters, and defeats them in his role as ‘scourge of the land.’ No one can stand up to his power. On the other hand, he is a simple and good father.”

<sup>lxix</sup> Nina Tumarkin’s words in *Lenin Lives!*, p. 253.

<sup>lxx</sup> Perhaps – though the main reasons for the revision were almost certainly 1) to “update” the film for the Lenin memorials in January 1938, when it was released; and 2) to “Stalinize” the film as part of the lead-up to the large-scale tributes to the despot on his 60<sup>th</sup> birthday (December 1939).

<sup>lxxi</sup> What I am suggesting raises the very interesting question of just how difficult it was for Svilova and her collaborators to “restore” *Three Songs* in 1969 – that is, how easy it was to excise Stalin from the film, while retaining its rhetorical coherence. At this point, I have no evidence on this score; clearly enough, my interpretation here suggests that the restoration was not (in this respect) difficult to realize.

<sup>lxxii</sup> “The Greeks wished to renounce neither Homer nor science. They sought for a compromise, and found it in the allegorical interpretation of Homer. [. . .] Homeric allegoresis had come into existence as a defense of Homer against philosophy. It was then taken over by the philosophical schools, and also by history and natural science. [Later], all schools of philosophy find that their doctrines are in Homer” (Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask, intro. Peter Godman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 204-5).