CHAPTER SIX
THE POLITICS OF LANGUAGE AND POPULAR CULTURE
IN DZIGA VERTOV’S “MAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA”

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Introduction

This paper will work through the uneasy relationship between “theory” and “history” with the help of a very famous movie, which for quite some time, since its rediscovery in the West in the 1970s, has been an object of film critics’ attention and analysis. Thus it is also an attempt to bridge history with Cultural Studies.1 The movie in question is Dziga Vertov’s “Man with a Movie Camera.”

In the case of theory and history there is always a question of how exactly the relationships between the two are conceptualized and correspondingly a theoretical history practiced. The simplest and most criticized way is the “application” of the one to the other, taking theory’s concepts or models to organize historical material or taking history as a system of knowledge helping to contextualize a theoretical issue, which is often reduced to the re-creation of the supposedly historical “background.” I’ll try to use history not as a system of knowledge which helps to reconstruct the context understood as historical background against which this movie appeared—this approach has been used by film critics many times, including in Dziga Vertov’s case (the most recent example is Robert Graham’s taking Sheila Fitzpatrick’s account of Soviet cultural revolution and “measuring” of movie against it). Instead I would like to use history as a method, something different from the language employed used in figurative discourses and, as Hayden White has shown us, ultimately coming down to four tropes exhausting the historian’s

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1 I am thinking about convergence between history and Cultural Studies along the lines suggested in Christina Lutter and Markus Reisenleitner, “Introducing History (in)to Cultural Studies: Some Remarks on the German-Speaking Context,” Cultural Studies, No. 16(5), 2002, 613.
The method I have in mind is something preceding the deployment of poetic tropes—a basic operation that allows for the establishment of either metaphorical, or metonymical, or synecdochal, or ironic relationships between objects.

One of the possible ways to conceptualize this historical method is to see it as mimesis, the establishment of resemblances between things, which not until later are encoded as being in a certain relationship. This mimesis is something Benjamin defined as the “human gift of seeing resemblances.” Such mimesis seems to be the basic procedure to follow even in anti-methods that oppose conventional history like the genealogical method proposed by Michel Foucault.

Besides theoretical history, another hyphenated concept I am concerned with here is social history. In the case of the latter, one of the more important problems it is facing right now seems to be its inability to deal with complex texts, a problem that forced some of its more prominent practitioners like Gareth Stedman Jones to switch to something very like the old intellectual history. The method of social history is definitely intertwined with its ideology and institutional setting but also with a certain kind of evidence with unprivileged, usually incoherent, scraps, bits and pieces of archival material and seemingly incompatible with the works speaking the language, shaping it, being the language themselves.

In the case of the “Man with the Movie Camera,” a work of art created with the help of a unique means of cinematography had offered and not resorting to the conventional repertoire of older art forms like literature and especially theater, social history or any history for that matter seems to be utterly irrelevant. What would happen if the historical method was applied to a text created in a culture that was grounded in experimentation with language? Early Soviet cinema saw itself as a language and Dziga Vertov was not an exception in holding this view.

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5 In Annette Michelson’s words “‘The Man with the Movie Camera’ is, among other things, a massive testimonial to this concern, sharing hyperbolizing the use of