The decade after the October Revolution marks one of the most exciting periods in Russian art. While the majority of artists continued prerevolutionary trends, various avant-garde groups sought fresh subjects and innovative forms that would correspond to the needs and goals of the new working class. One of the major questions of the period was what role artists should play in the socialist state, and how critics should relate to the art of the past. Numerous factions of the Soviet avant-garde developed their own—often contradictory—concepts concerning this problem, while at the same time the members of the avant-garde as a whole were united in their effort to support all sorts of experimentation and freedom of theoretical expression. The Constructivists, who were the most radical among them, viewed the artist as an "engineer" whose duty was to construct useful "objects" like any other worker and to participate actively in building a new society.

Within the concept of the Constructivist ideas, film was immediately proclaimed the most purposeful "tool" for reforming society: it had an enormous capacity for reaching a vast number of people, conveying messages in an accessible manner, recording reality directly, and affecting people's everyday life by showing it "as it is." Accordingly, filmmakers were considered "constructors" who ought to produce "things" that would help change the old bourgeois attitude toward reality as well as art itself.

Like Constructivists in other arts, Dziga Vertov*** dreamt of establishing

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* This study is drawn from a forthcoming book "Constructivism in Cinema: 'The Man with the Movie Camera.'" I am indebted to Professor Roberta Reeder for cooperating with me on the research and editing of this project.

** Dziga Vertov was born Denis Arkadievich Kaufman on 2 January 1896 in Delvstok. His father was a bookdealer and bibliophile. When Denis was nineteen, the family moved to Moscow, and a year later, he enrolled in the Psychoneurological Institute in Petrograd. His main interest at the Institute was the study of human perception. The following summer, in 1916, he organized the "Laboratory of Hearing," in which he performed experiments with sound recording. He also wrote a novel, The Iron Hand, now lost. A year later he returned to Moscow, where he met Aleksandr Lemberg, a cameraman who introduced him to the cinema and to Moscow artists at the famous "Poet's Cafe." During the spring
an absolutely visual mode of expression and communication that would be universally understood regardless of national boundaries. To accomplish this, he insisted that cinema should not imitate other arts, that it should be liberated from literary and theatrical conventions, especially that of the narrative. This new form of cinema, according to Vertov, ought to be used as a vehicle for "reshaping" the dormant movie-goers' consciousness, stimulating their intellectual participation during and even after film-viewing. Consequently in the spring of 1919 he declared war on bourgeois "photo-plays" (kinodrama), and gathered around himself a group of collaborators whom he named the kinoks (kinoki), a title which reflected their dedication to cinema. (In Russian, kino means film, while oko functions as a participatory suffix at the same time implying a notion of the eye and seeing.) The kinoks group included cameramen, editors, technicians, and animators, among them Vertov's brother, Mikhail Kaufman, who worked as a cameraman (and appeared as the protagonist) in The Man with the Movie Camera, Vertov's most famous film, and the director's wife, Elizaveta Svilova, herself an editor (who preserves that "role" in The Man with the Movie Camera). Vertov, Kaufman, and Svilova formed "The Council of the Three" (Sovet troikh) which acted as the "higher organ of kinoks" (vysshii organ kinokov).

To understand how Vertov applied to cinema the Constructivist concept of "making an art object," it is necessary to relate both his most avant-garde film as well as his theoretical views to other avant-garde writings on literature, painting, theater, architecture, and experimental achievements in other contemporary media. Vertov's films were meant to show on the screen life events as they exist in reality, without arranging situations (instsenirovka) in order to "shoot them with the hidden camera (skrytoi kameroi, semkoi vrasplokh) pretending to register—on the celluloid strip—the true film-fact."

This does not mean that the "film-facts" should not be restructured in the process of editing: Vertov relied heavily on montage, i.e., on reconstructing the "life-facts" in a cinematic way. This became particularly obvious in The Man with the Movie Camera (1929), which demonstrated the Constructivist principle applied to cinema, and included a radical critique of the narrative, or staged (igrovoi) films which, as Vertov believed, did not belong to the new society.

The revolutionary socialist principle of filmmaking Vertov promoted was called "Film-Truth" (kinopravda), from which later emerged his directorial