

**Communist decoding of the world:
"Enthusiasm: Symphony of
the Donbass" by Dziga Vertov¹**

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*Down with the law which for us
Adam and Eve have left.
We'll ruin the jade of the past.
V. Mayakovskiy (1918)*

The definition of "symphony" offered by the Encyclopaedia Britannica sounds as follows: "A lengthy form of musical composition for orchestra, normally consisting of several large sections, or movements."

The "Symphony" by Dziga Vertov corresponds to the formal canons of classical symphony. As a real symphony, it is composed of three parts: "Church", "Mining-Plants", "Kolkhoz"; and three vertical "layers": underground – coal mining, ground – people and machines, and celestial – running clouds. The latter symbolize revolt and its aftermath: the bright sunshine to be expected. Dziga Vertov, in his Symphony however, breaks the laws of rhythm. Instead of the required "allegro-adagio-allegro" the entire work is dominated by "presto". There was no other way, the Soviet country in the "hostile capitalist encirclement" (Stalin) had no other way to survive. The Revolution and the Civil War led to a situation where the first proletarian country in the world remained almost without any proletariat because of during the revolution, basically all industrial activity was stopped. In fact, the question of the survival of the state was stake, which depended on the success of a new industrialization.

The "Symphony of Donbass" – a documentary about the Donbass region in the time of the first five-year plan (1928–1932), can be viewed from different perspectives: from the point of view of film history, in the context of political propaganda and, of course, as a documentary chronicle.

¹ Produced by Ukrainfilm (Ukraine Soviet Republic), 1930. Premiere: April 2, 1931. Directed by Dziga Vertov. Photographed by Boris Cejtlin, K. Kualev.

The art value of the movie is undeniable. There has been a lot written about the technological and stylistic innovativeness of the film.² It is enough to mention that the movie paved the way to the sound newsreel, here organized in the form of a symphony. German newspapers wrote about the completeness of the artistic composition of the "Symphony of Donbass." Many artists of the epoch gave enthusiastic review of the movie, such as the composer Hanns Eisler and the actor Charlie Chaplin.

By the events in October 1917, a revolution was achieved that for the first time aimed not only to capture power ("state machine" in the words of Lenin), but to create an ideal society, and a radically new political, economic and social system. In 1920, Herbert Wells told that "Bolsheviks would have to rebuild not only the material organization of the society, but the way of thinking of all the people." Thus, Soviet "designers" saw the way of achieving their goal in the creation of a "new human".

In the Soviet "Propaganda State" (Peter Kenez) any movie became automatically an instrument of propaganda. Vladimir Lenin defined the cinematograph as "the most important among all the arts" for the new Bolshevik regime and its propaganda machine. In this context, the "Symphony of Donbass" is undoubtedly propagandistic. The propaganda of the Soviet way of life in the movie, however, might be rather a consequence, but not a direct objective of the director. The underlying idea appears to be that the reality of the Soviet life itself is the best propaganda, so the task is just to capture this real life. As Dziga Vertov himself told, his movie is an attempt to offer a "communist decoding of the world".

The director shows the beginning of the new epoch by presenting the process of changing the characteristic visual and acoustic symbols: the hammer and sickle, and the star were replaced for the double-headed eagle and the cross. Factory whistle blasts and The International replaced the ringing of church bells and the anthem "God Save the Tsar". Young and energetic people came instead of the drunk men and faceless old women.

The scene of drunkenness alternating with shots of the church service bears a symbolic meaning. In this case, alcoholism is a connotation of the old regime: the "religious intoxication" of people. According to Marxism, religion has a function of compensating workers for their

² See, e.g.: Feldman, Seth. Dziga Vertov: A Guide to References and Resources. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1979.

financial difficulties. Therefore, religion offers a way to escape into a fantasy world, "the opium for the people." That is the idea behind the parallel drawn between drunk men and women kissing the feet of the Crucified, appearing as parallels. "The new Soviet man" should sober up, get rid of all religious prejudices. The real Soviet patterns such as labour and mass meeting, as the highest level of manifestation of the activity of collective will, came to the place of prayer and drinking.

The "Symphony of Donbass" is also an anthem about technological development, perceived as the depository of an absolute progress. In the movie, we can still see the manual labour and the use of horses coal mining. It is, however, rather seen as vestiges of the past.

Workers are presented with their clamps as pulling out the molten metal band twisting like a snake. Just like an animal tamers, the Donbass workers appear as subduing fire and other elements. In the new world, nature is not a "temple but a workshop, and a man is a worker in it!" (Ivan Turgenev). Even a small plot about a dancing woman with the engine steam on the background refer to the possibility of not a full rest, but only a short break during the work. Indeed, after a few minutes, "with songs in battle" – as it is proclaimed by a "hero" of the film – women are going back to work and the steam engine is reactivated. The agricultural machines marching through the fields in orderly rows resemble of tanks formation. Only, as opposed to the tanks, they are not the fighting for power, but for the harvest. There is no time for rest: "The construction of the Socialism has been coming with full speed" – says one of the banners shown. "The New Soviet man" is the human of labour above all, as it became a cliché in the Soviet press. The new man on the screen appears as surrounded by technological devices: various machines and within an industrial landscape.

The industrialization process resulted in changes in the urban landscape: new industrial centres evolved and the old cities were transforming. These changes included the appearance of industrial areas, working-class suburbs and factories. At the same time, the infrastructure was improved due to the implementation of railways, trams and telegraph. Before the revolution, the public perception of the industrialization process was extremely ambiguous: it was seen as a progress, but also as depersonalizing the human, reducing them to machines, and changing the familiar landscape and the traditional values. After the revolution, industrialization was definitely perceived as an absolute progress, and the "dehumanization" of human – presented in the movie as cog-

wheels in a huge machinery – was no more appreciated as a negative phenomenon, but rather as the road towards the future.

In general, machinery and technology are important elements, but the underlying ideas are even more emphasized. During the pre-Soviet industrialization, machine building and coal mining in Donbass developed even faster than during the period of the Soviet five-year plan. A quote by the mining engineer Alexander Fenin, reflects well the attitude of the society towards these processes of the recent past: "We perceived that the southern [Russian] industrialization was being carried out in a kind of strange isolation, almost as if it took place in a foreign country. We heard and knew that in many parts of the Basin they were constructing steel mills, excavating great coal mines and laying railroads; we could measure the extent of this enormous industrial expansion, but we never found any written account of it in the press, or the faintest echo in society when we met it, or the slightest sign of interest in what was going on there."³ In contrast to the pre-revolutionary time, during the period of the Soviet industrialization, the ideas about it came faster than technology, as it is well reflected by the frequent appearance of the topic in the media. In this respect, the documentary "Symphony of Donbass" belongs to the category of propaganda movies.

The symphonic orchestra is an efficient image to reflect the essence of the "new society." In the 27th minute of the movie, an official addresses the miners with his speech as follows: "Can one person, even he is the head of the mine, solve the problems resulting from a mine accident? No, we need to mobilize all the workers, all the members of the Komsomol. We have to organize all the people we have here, in the mine, they have to be involved into the elimination of the problem." The symphonic orchestra operates the same way: the conductor's role is important, but only a perfectly synchronized work of all the musicians, following the notes without any improvisation, can give birth to a symphonic music characterized by the highest level of rationality. As there is no place in the symphony for solo, there was no place for privacy and life outside of the collective in the Communist society. The scene in which the miners are trained to work with a pickaxe lifting and dropping their instruments synchronously, is symbolic in this respect.⁴ They resemble of piano hammers that are completely controlled by the

³ Fenin, A. I. *Coal and Politics in Late Imperial Russia. Memoirs of a Russian Mining Engineer.* Northern Illinois University Press, 1990, 80-81.

⁴ See also the music video of "The Wall" by Pink Floyd

musician. The promise made by a young female worker at the meeting "to top the planned production amount with 20.000 tons" is repeated by a chorus of workers in the background. It is not a private issue of the worker anymore, but the matter of the entire community, and this gives them the right to control her. Perhaps this is why the picture of building Socialism does not seem to be so appealing for the modern viewer. In the film, we can see enthusiastic participants too who simply enjoy life and youth as such. But if the strict laws of symphonic music apply to the society, one gets scared...

The documentary value of the movie, however, is above question. On one hand, it presents the technological innovations and working methods of the period, the changes in the landscape and the human appearance. On the other, it is a specific historical source of the perception of these changes and about their official propaganda in general. The third important aspect lies in the medium: the documentary was the first sound movie ever in the Soviet Union, and thus itself belonged to the category of technological innovations admired and celebrated by its creation. Dziga Vertov's experiments with the possibilities and tools of film making – as analysed in details above – are suited into and express the approach of the era towards technological development.

***The results of an international research project
"Ubi universitas, ibi Europa"***

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International project "Ubi universitas – Ibi Europa. Transfer and adaptation of university ideas in the Russian Empire of the second half of the 18th – first half of the 19th century" was officially implemented in 2008-2010, although some ideas began to be discussed by project participants some time earlier, and the implementation of all scheduled tasks took place in 2012, when the final monograph was published. The base for the project was the German Historical Institute in Moscow (curator of the project by the Institute was Dr. A. V. Doronin), core funding was provided by the Gerda Henkel Stiftung (AZ 02/SR/08).

Participants of the project included historians representing Moscow, Kharkov and Kazan universities. Already at this early stage of the project, the participants were united into three study groups. The objectives of the Moscow group (head – prof. A. Yu. Andreev, he also supervised the implementation of the project) were to study various types of relationships within corporations in Russian universities of the second half of the 18th – first half of the 19th century (disclosed largely through university conflicts that demonstrated a different understanding of ideological foundations of university and, therefore, the characteristics of their transfer and adaptation in Russia). These included issues of formalization of the corporation by obtaining privileges, adaptation of the system of academic titles and degrees in Russia, hierarchical division within the corporation, relations between professors and students as well as their changes due to the assimilation of "classical university" ideas.

The tasks of project participants from Kazan (head – prof. E. A. Vishlenkova) included primarily the study of governance arrangements, formal and informal power relations practices in the university and the state: the role of trustees in the history of Russian universities, administrative problems, roles and functions of Rector, inspectors and other positions in the corporate culture, formation of norms and deviations in an academic environment. Special task of this group within the project, actual specifically for the Kazan University, was to study the "educational colonization" of the region through the university, i.e. its contribution to the development of infrastructure, regional study of life, aimed at improving it, and so on.