Soviet documentary & propaganda

“Of all arts, the cinema is the most important for us”

Lenin
Russia

- 1905 Russo-Japanese War
- 1905 Revolt
- 1914 World War I
- 1917 February Czar deposed, Kerensky heads provisional government
- 1917 October Bolsheviks seize government, establish Soviet Union (1917-1991)
- Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin
Montage – Film Editing

- Lev Kuleshov – Creative Film Experiments
- Eisenstein’s Montage of Attractions
Cinema as propaganda

1917 – Bolshevik Revolution
1919 – film industry nationalized
    VGIK – State Institute of Cinematography – founded

Documentary filmmakers of the 1920s:
    committed Marxists
    wanted to educate and indoctrinate Soviet people

Prominent types of non fiction film in the 1920s:

    Newsreel-indoctrinational series
    Compilations of archival footage tracing recent history
    Epic-scale celebrations of contemporary Soviet life
Dziga Vertov

- Worked on Soviet agitprop train
- 1922-25 Kino-Pravda, Kino Eye
- 1929 Man With the Movie Camera
Kino Glaz theory & practice of filmmaking

Close relationship between filming process and human thought
“Machine eye” of the camera is more perfect than the eye

His film practice demanded anti narrative, antifictional forms
to arrive at the ‘truths’ of the actual world

Instead of exotic subjects (Flaherty) Vertov zeroes in on contemporary reality – records facts found in real life

The ideological meaning of this reality comes out through editing (montage) – reality ‘deciphered’ by Communist worldview

Fascination with technology & machines – futurism & modernity
Films by Vertov

*Kino Pravda* - 1922-25  
23 series of short films  
propaganda newsreels, 20 minutes, 3 or 4 reports to inform & indoctrinate covering life in the Soviet Union  
No recreation or direction – ‘life as it is’, ‘life caught unawares’  
Nitty-gritty naturalism – vs. Flaherty’s romantic naturalism  
Screen journalism – communicated dynamically with audience  

In *Kino Pravda* clash Vertov’s artistic and ideological impulses

*Kino Eye* (Kino Glaz) – 1924  
feature – length documentary w/ vignettes & anecdotes – investigative journalism
Vertov’s masterpiece: *Man with the Movie Camera*

1929 – dense, complex experimental film
   impressionistic montage of Moscow life from dawn to dusk – ‘city symphony’
   examines filmic illusion in relation to reality

Uses wide range of special effects: split screen, animation, slow motion, speeded motion

Cinematographer – Vertov’s brother, Mikhail Kaufman
Other Vertov films

*One-sixth of the World* 1926

*Symphony of the Dombas* 1931

*Three Songs of Lenin* 1934
Other filmmakers

Esther Shub

pioneered the compilation documentary
reconstructed Russian history through editing diverse materials – newsreels, home movies, archival records
1927 – *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty*
Russian history from 1912 to 1917

Victor Turin

made the documentary epic *Turksib* 1929
about the construction of the Turkestan/Siberia railway
The documentary impulse of Eisenstein

His cinema is very close to the documentary impulse

Subjects related to actual life lived recently

People in relation to their institutions - social, economic & political

His purpose is to inform & involve emotionally regarding
- Bolshevik Revolution, origins & struggles
- support for the new Soviet State

Key films: Strike 1924  Battleship Potemkin  1925
          October  1927  The General Line  1929