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Beyond Resistance: Subtraction as Methodology in Badiou and Vertov

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Abstract

To be sustainable a resistant practice needs to think beyond its opposition to the dominant practice. One of the ways to construe a truly resistant practice is to think of it as *subtractive*. Like resistance, subtraction implies removal, a distancing and insubordination. However, beyond its superficial negative meaning, this paper will demonstrate that there is something affirmative and enabling about subtraction. It is this affirmative supplementation that raises it to a methodology. Subtraction as methodology is evidenced in the filmmaking of Dziga Vertov in the nascent years of the Soviet Union and in the philosophy of Alain Badiou, for whom subtraction is an analog to the philosophical enterprise. This paper will examine the contours of subtractive thought through the writings of Badiou and the filmmaking of Vertov, which demonstrates its rigorous manifestation within the field of artistic practice.

Introduction

Is cinema, CINEMA?

We blow up cinema,

For

CINEMA

to be seen.

Dziga Vertov (1917): The Laboratory of Hearing

I have come here with the duty of proclaiming that the madness of subtraction constitutes an act. Better: that it is the act par excellence, the act of a truth, one by which I come to know the only thing that one may ever know in the element of the real, and that is the void of being as such.

Alain Badiou, Conditions.

Dziga Vertov (1896-1954), the experimental filmmaker from the early years of the Soviet Union was well known for his intractability and defiance, expressed in manifestoes, poems, letters, polemics and, more importantly, in the films that Vertov made over his short-lived career which attacked the very foundations of filmmaking. A famous photo of Vertov shows him suspended in mid air (having jumped from a second floor window for an experiment to test film speed and movement), filmed by his brother and cinematographer, Mikhail Kaufmann. His expression and gesture bear the insolence and bravado that crystallises his filmmaking.

It is not difficult to identify a similar defiant spirit in the contemporary French philosopher, Alain Badiou. Badiou is well known for his attacks on both continental and analytic philosophy, (and challenging their very distinction), for his attempt to consider the abandoned philosophical category of the subject (albeit one that exceeds the human animal), and also for his famous 'returns' to Descartes and Plato, thinkers who have become unfashionable in recent times. At conferences, he answers questions with his naughty laugh, between a chuckle and a cough, and states in his halting English, 'You said that. I did not.'

For both Vertov and Badiou, this spirit of defiance is elevated into a methodology. The spirit becomes the content of their thought. When Vertov started a new film movement, Kino-Eye, he not only offered a new understanding of cinema but also insisted on how films should be made. For Badiou, thinking is simply participation in what he calls a truth procedure. Thinking is not only the application of theory but is the decisive action that a subject takes which demonstrates their transformation in the face of change.

I will use Badiou's term, 'subtraction', to discuss the methodological similarities between Vertov and Badiou. Subtraction, or what Frank Ruda calls 'putting a minus in front of everything' (Ruda, 2015, p. 88), expresses both the spirit and content of Vertov's and Badiou's enterprises. For Badiou, the concept is so fundamental to his philosophy that it is 'shorthand for his essential philosophical affirmation' (Clemens, 2005, p. 106). Badiou acknowledges the artistic and poetic lineage of subtractive thought, in particular its origins from Mallarmé who 'created [his] Work by elimination, and all acquired truth was merely springing from an impression's loss' (Mallarmé, 2010).

Subtraction, for Mallarmé (and Badiou), involves the elimination of all that is extraneous, but this removal is strengthening and productive: 'having twinkled, had burnt itself and allowed me, thanks to its cleared darkness, to progress further in the Absolute Darkness' sensation' (Mallarmé, 2010). Therefore, and importantly, despite its name, subtraction is not merely negative. It harbours a positive supplementation.

Vertov's subtractive move is his demand that cinema return to its fundamental relation with life and rid itself of all the detritus of other arts that cling to its history. But his demand did not terminate there – it did not end in the dead end of shots and edits, of some version of pure cinema. Vertov showed how cinema, proceeding subtractively, can create rich, dynamic and complex works.

In this paper, I will attempt to tease out the dimensions of subtraction in Vertov and Badiou's respective practices. All aspects of their subtractive thinking are interrelated and I acknowledge the artificiality of delineating 'subtractive categories'. I will discuss how each dimension is enacted in Badiou and Vertov's thinking *separately*. This is important as what I am attempting to do is a collocation, not the imbrication of high theory to artistic practice, which is eschewed by both Badiou and Vertov.

As a filmmaker, subtraction as methodology resonates with me – despite being faced with the plenitude of the world, a plenitude of footage, a film is made subtractively – more by taking away, then by adding.

By invoking Badiou and Vertov's practice to demonstrate the contours of a subtractive methodology, what I hope to show is that it is open and enabling. In *Method Meets Art*, Patricia Leavy emphasises that a methodology should facilitate 'composing, weaving, and orchestrating' (Leavy, 2009, p. 254). Badiou calls subtraction, 'a possible path that differs from the dominant one' (Badiou in Bosteels, 2011, p. 326). For Badiou, the dominant ideologies (especially those of the

20th century) are negative and destructive. Subtraction offers a positive way forward.

Vertov never left a general theoretical edifice as Eisenstein did. Vertov's theories were often written on the run and deal with specific, local issues with regard to a particular problem or film. But his subtractive thinking is still resonant as it enables productive engagement with *specific* issues affecting practice.

Subtraction as dissent

At its most basic level, to subtract simply means to withdraw or to remove; a defiance, exemplified in Camus' famous definition of a rebel as 'A man who says no, but whose refusal does not imply a renunciation' (Camus, 1962, p. 10). Both Badiou and Vertov show intransigence in refusing prevailing doxas and insisting on an iconoclastic trajectory. In Vertov's words it is to *never* follow the easy road, 'the line of minimum resistance'.

Of course, rather than rebels, both Badiou and Vertov have been accused of being reactionaries, archaic mandarins holding on to outmoded ideas. For Badiou, his unapologetic Platonism and Maoism are easy targets for vilification. In Vertov's case, his celebration of the Soviet state. However, for both Badiou and Vertov, what Plato, Mao and the October Revolution provided is the spirit of militancy which they applied to their respective practices.

Badiou: It is Right to Rebel

Badiou's thought returns philosophy to a spirit that is purely Socratic: *everything consensual is suspect!* For Badiou, the duty of philosophy is to uphold truth. In the throes of post-structuralism of the 1970s and 1980s, he was one of the few philosophers who rejected the relegation of thinking truths to exercises in sophistry or rhetoric for which he paid a heavy price.

Another attack on Badiou since the 1970s is his avowed Maoism. For Badiou, Maoism provides the very ground for rebellious thinking by associating thinking itself with rebellion, encapsulated in Mao's maxim: 'It is right to rebel against reactionaries' (Badiou, 1975; 2008). It is "right" as there are 'reasons' for it – philosophy being the domain of reason, is thus the domain of rebellion.

For Badiou, Maoism introduced a fundamental scission in thinking that is always 'taking sides and the systematisation of a partisan experience' (Badiou, 1975; 2008). This is encapsulated in Mao's famous axiom: one divides into two. Rebellion, for both Mao and Badiou, is the 'originary place of correct ideas' (Badiou, 1975; 2008).

Philosophy that is committed to Maoist thought is first and foremost a 'logical revolt'. It:

... sets up thought against injustice, against the defective state of the world and life. But it sets thought up in a movement which conserves and defends argument and reason, and which ultimately always proposes a new logic (Badiou, Feltham, & Clemens, 2003, p. 39).

Badiou sees his philosophical enterprise as confronting the three prevalent orientations of contemporary philosophy: hermeneutics, analytic philosophy and forms of postmodern philosophy. These three orientations may appear oppositional but Badiou points out that they are in fact united – first by their common proclamation of the end of metaphysics itself, and second by their submission to the linguistic turn in philosophy. All three orientations abdicate philosophy from its concern with the metaphysics of truth and assert that language (or a proposition in language) is the only site for thought.

For Badiou, if philosophy:

... never confront[s] anything but the polyvalence of meaning, then philosophy will never assume the challenge that is put out to it by a world subordinated to the merchandising of money and information. This world is an anarchy of more or less regulated, more or less coded fluxes, wherein money, products and images are exchanged. If philosophy is to sustain its desire in such a world, it must propose a principle of interruption (Badiou, Clemens, & Feltham, 2003, p. 36).

Vertov: Iconoclast not Reactionary

There is a wide split in the discussion around Vertov's films, from entries in film encyclopedia to scholarly articles. On the one hand, there is praise for the boldness of their form, for their intrepid experimentation, and on the other hand, criticism of them as propagandist, the voice-pieces of the party state, as refusing to distinguish the party line which they extolled from the lived experience of the society they represented. This image suggests a mismatch between form and content, most obviously in films such as *Enthusiasm* (1930), a film that generates acclaim and revulsion in equal degrees.

Since Vertov was always first and foremost preoccupied with cinematic form, despite his own predilections, the content of his films always became subservient to the thinking of form. Often, the form undermined Vertov's stated intent. Party apparatchiks and critics were aware of this and were not fans of his films.

Cinematic form for Vertov is not a transparent vehicle for conveying an idea. It is wrought, manipulated and always striving for the impossible. Vertov constantly struggled to integrate new cinematic ideas in his films which is one of the reasons his films proved more popular with filmmakers – both in and out of the Soviet Union – than with audiences. He understood that the true cinematic mission was not about pandering to current tastes:

One of the chief accusations leveled at us is that we are not intelligible to the masses.

Even if one allows that some of our work is difficult to understand, does that mean we should not undertake serious exploratory work at all?

If the masses need light propaganda pamphlets, does that mean they don't need the serious articles of Engels, Lenin? ... The LENIN of Russian cinema may appear in your midst today, but you will not allow him to work because the results of his production will seem new and incomprehensible (Vertov & Michelson, 1984, p. 36).

Enthusiasm is perhaps one of the best examples of how Vertov's bold cinematic agenda transcended its intention as cheap propaganda for Stalin's first Five Year Plan and Vertov's own personal politics. If, as Graham Roberts asserts, *Enthusiasm* 'is part of the mythologising project so central to the Stalinist political and cultural hegemony' (Roberts, 1999, p. 100), then it is an abject failure. However, the film is an exemplar of cinematic art.

Vertov was certainly committed to October and it provided him with inspiration but his concerns were always first and foremost cinematic. That is why *Enthusiasm*, Vertov's first sound film, though it celebrated Stalin's first Five Year Plan, was maligned by the party apparatchiks. Karl Radek, writing in 1931 soon after he renounced Trotsky and needing to demonstrate his allegiance to Stalin, excoriated *Enthusiasm* as it 'represents a step backward in Soviet cinematography ... despite the perpetual cheering and brandishing of red flags. It is the very model of how not to make propaganda' (Radek, 1931 in Vertov & Michelson, 1984, p. LVIII).

Enthusiasm: Symphony of the Donbass is one of the first films in Soviet cinema that integrated both location and studio sound, achieving a complex and multi-layered soundtrack. Vertov had been thinking about the possibilities of sound in cinema since 1918 (Feldman, 1979, p. 2) 'and

invested the “Great Mute” of silent film with implied sound ... events denoting sound, objects, and sound technologies’ (Kahn, 1999, p. 141). *Enthusiasm* was his opportunity to make his plans into reality. His treatment ‘conceived the film almost totally in terms of sound’ (Fisher, 1977-1978, p. 25).

Vertov’s attitude to sound differed greatly to that of other Soviet directors. In their collective *Statement on Sound* (1928), Eisenstein, Pudovkin and Aleksandrov were fearful of synchronous sound and to them, sound’s ‘most probable application ... be along the line of least resistance, i.e. in the field of the satisfaction of simple curiosity’ (Eisenstein, Pudovkin, & Aleksandrov, 1994, p. 234). They thought of sound as limited and its use only ever as non-dialectical. Vertov fixates on the phrase ‘line of least resistance’ when he speaks of his own sound experiments as refusing that line, clearly mocking the statement which he considered not ‘worth a bean’. To him:

... neither documentaries nor play films are obligated to have visible moments coincide [or not coincide] with audible moments. Sound shots and silent shots are edited alike; they can coincide [or not coincide] in montage or they can mix with each other in various combinations (Vertov, 1972 in Fischer, 1977).

It was widely believed at the time *Enthusiasm* was made that sound recording on location was impossible. The kinok technicians spent over five months working with the engineer and inventor Shorin, preparing a sound system that was portable enough for location recording. Vertov and his team tested the system in the field twice and each time made modifications. What they *achieved* was a cumbersome system that Vertov, Svilova, and Boris Tseitlin, the cinematographer, dragged with them over a hundred kilometres, location to location in the Donbass, including to underground mines. Much of the footage shot for *Enthusiasm* was destroyed when the equipment and film were rained on when they were camping on location. This was how Vertov described their experience:

We did not give in to obstacles, we surmounted them. We did not follow the line of least resistance either in shooting or in editing. Of course, we also suffered significant losses. We must, in my view, speak of these shortcomings as those of a film somewhat maimed in battle. Torn apart. Grown hoarse. Covered with wounds. But a film, just the same, that has not retreated in the face of difficulties (Vertov & Michelson, 1984, p.114).

Having recorded the film and sound simultaneously – that is, having achieved the near impossible task of synchronous field recording – Vertov and Svilova:

... did not limit [themselves] to the simplest concurrence of image with sound, but followed the line of maximum resistance – under existing conditions – that of complex interaction of sound with image (Vertov & Michelson, 1984, p. 111).

In fact, synchronous sound was the least-used technique in the final film. It was mainly used for the speeches of workers. Vertov’s concern was with sound-image relation and not just how to integrate direct sound into the soundtrack. He was not concerned about documentary realism.

For Vertov, sound in film must aim for the rhythm of a poem in which rhythm (form) itself is meaning. Sound in film must ‘compute the enthusiasm of the Donbass workers, *converting it into figures*’ (Vertov & Michelson, 1984, p. 296 emphasis added).

Lucy Fisher (1977) identified fifteen different techniques that Vertov used to achieve a complex sound image relation in *Enthusiasm*, including metaphorical and reflexive uses of sound. The soundtrack of *Enthusiasm* has been praised since its release and still sounds contemporary today. Chris Marker called *Enthusiasm* ‘the greatest documentary ever made’ (as cited in Danchev, 2011, p. 211). Chaplin, no lover of sound cinema, upon seeing the film, exclaimed: ‘I would never have believed it possible to assemble mechanical noises to create such beauty. One of the most superb

symphonies I have known. Dziga Vertov is a musician' (as cited in Sadoul & Morris, 1972, p. 104).

Enthusiasm is one of the first examples of what would later be called *musique concrete*, where location sound, ambient noise, sound effects and music were used to create what in contemporary terminology is a piece of sonic art (Kahn, 1999, p. 124).

It is the contemporaneity of *Enthusiasm* that drove DJ Spooky (Paul Miller) to attempt a remix of a section of it, as he sees in *Enthusiasm*:

... the origins of 'remix' culture ... I like to think of Vertov as the first 'youtube [sic] director.' His work is all about the everyday world being displaced by its reflection in the cinematic mirror of early modernity, now digital modernity (Miller, n.d).

It is clear that Vertov and the kinoks (members of his film collective) chose to film activities in the Donbass more for their own bold cinematic experiments than for any other (political) reason. *Enthusiasm* is about experimenting, not following the path of least resistance. The film demonstrates a parallelism between the enthusiasm of the workers and farmers (committing to higher production targets) who also refuse the path of least resistance, and to the kinoks' own filmmaking. The enthusiasm of the Donbass workers *is* the enthusiasm of the filmmaking. This suggests why the film failed as propaganda. The workers and the kinoks should have stuck to the customary road. Radek in his criticism suggested that the film should have shown 'the levers of command which will help us to win' (Radek, 1931 in Vertov & Michelson, 1984, p. LVIII), and this is what the film failed to do – in highlighting the enthusiasm of the workers taking on the challenge of increased production themselves, the film failed to show the importance of party leadership.

Enthusiasm places the materiality of sound front and centre and refuses the complete suture between sound and the image. It shows how sound can work independently, beyond representation and signification. This is what Vertov establishes for the image as well, refusing its complete link with the world. In *Enthusiasm*, the Donbass worker is also independent. Sound, the image and the Donbass worker are therefore dangerous – they are *over-enthusiastic*, can function on their own and may not fulfill the roles ascribed to them.

Subtraction and the void

The etymology of the word 'subtract' consists of the Latin 'sub', *under*, and 'trahere' *to pull or draw*. Subtraction is thus 'what is pulled from below'. It concerns itself with mining the unseen, what Badiou calls the 'void of the situation' and what Vertov called, 'what the eye does not see'. The thinking of the void is central to Badiou and Vertov. Despite their materialism, both place a firm belief that the only substantial reality is the void itself. However, where this belief leads is not to the predictable conclusion that the real is unknowable, but to a fervent activism to understand the real.

Badiou: The Void and the Event

Badiou ultimately founds his philosophy and his theory of the event on what is drawn from under – the void itself. Turning to the modern mathematical branch of set theory, in particular its concept of the empty or null set (\emptyset), enables him to think of the void as not simply 'nothing' or 'non-being'. Zermelo-Frankel set theory affirms that the empty set (or the void) not only exists but is included in each and every set; it is a subset of every set. It is the set from which every other set is initiated. Foundational but never presented, the void marks the real of the situation.

Badiou's wager is that being qua being, divested of all particularity, is pure, inconsistent multiplicity – simply, a multiple of multiples. Ontology, the science of being qua being, is itself a situation (a set), and like any situation is simply 'a presented multiplicity' – it presents multiples as structured (consistent) or unified. Badiou's ontology is *subtractive* because being qua being is subtracted from ontology itself as 'every structured presentation unrepresents "its" void'. However, in another subtractive move, Badiou asserts that it is only ontology, the science of being qua

being, that enables this insight.

All situations are structured – what Badiou calls ‘the count as one’. Within situations, multiples are discerned as counted ‘ones’, or consistent. Set theory’s Axiom of Extensionality states that any two sets are identical if they have identical elements. Since a set is a set of sets, to assert the identity of any set (to count all its elements) could lead to an infinite regress. What finally limits the count is the multiple of ‘nothing’, the void – the awareness that the set is composed of the void. ‘The void of a situation is simply what is not there, but what is necessary for anything to be there’ (Badiou, et al., 2003, p. 12). The void sutures every consistent situation to its inconsistent being because the pure inconsistent multiple necessarily ‘in-consists’ within the (structured) situation. This is why Badiou asserts that the void is the name of being qua being as it is the only index ‘that is subtracted from any presentation and hence presents nothing’ (Ruda, 2015, p. 96).

Being uncounted, the void escapes the effect of structure but it remains as a kind of ‘phantom remainder’, the unconscious or unsymbolisable real of every situation. The void thus threatens the foundation of the count itself. In an attempt to foreclose this danger, the situation imposes a second count, a meta-count, counting the count itself, re-presenting the elements in a situation. This metastructure is Badiou’s conception of the state (or more precisely, *the state of the situation*). The role of the state is to order the elements within it, counting elements that are included and those that are not. However, there will always be elements that belong to the situation but are not included, that are presented but not represented. In set theory, the Axiom of the Power Set states that the subset of any set exceeds its initial set thus producing an excess.

Badiou’s ontology is, in sum, ‘the idea that what the state seeks to foreclose through the power of its count is the void of the situation, and the event that in each case reveals it’ (Badiou, 1998, p. 134, as cited in Hallward, 2003, p. 100). For Badiou, in any situation, there is always an absence and it is this absence that becomes glaringly obvious during an event.

The idea that the event produces an instantaneous revelation of the void is best exemplified in emancipatory politics. Badiou states:

Politics exists (in the sense of an occurrence of equality) because the whole of the community does not count a given collective as one of its parts. The whole counts this collective as nothing. No sooner does this nothing express itself, which it can do only by declaring itself to be whole, than politics exists. In this sense the ‘we are nothing, let us be everything’ of The Internationale sums up every politics (of emancipation, or equality) (Badiou, 2005b, p. 115).

Badiou refuses to confer on the void a metaphysical or transcendental value. The void may be foundational, but of itself is not the source of creativity. Badiou warns us that it is ‘pointless to set off in search of the nothing’ (Badiou, 2005a, p. 54). It is important to note that the event itself is not the void. The event is an illegal multiple (according to the laws of ontology, or set theory) consisting of its elements and itself (self-belonging). As it is illegal, it disappears but leaves a material remainder. The event convokes the void through its disappearance, showing ‘what there is now was previously devoid of truth ... It is on the basis of this void that the subject constitutes itself as a fragment of the process of a truth’ (Badiou, 2005, p. 54). It is through the void of the disappeared event that Badiou bases his militant theory of subjective fidelity.

Vertov: Seeing what the Eye Cannot See

Vertov’s cinema is essentially founded on reality – on what is in the world. This conviction, what Aumont calls ‘essentially religious – belief that reality signifies something’ (Aumont, 2013, p. 60) was based on the simple fact that the ‘raw facts’ of life, is ‘the nothing’, the void of cinema but also that reality is simply not what is out there in the visible realm.

There is plenty of evidence to suggest that with Kino-Eye, Vertov’s cinematic thinking is on what is hidden from view. Cinema for Vertov can literally see the unseen. In one of Vertov’s first writings on Kino Eye, *The Birth of Kino Eye* (1924), he defined it as first and foremost ‘that which the eye

cannot see'. Vertov's Theory of Intervals identified the interval as the *empty* space between frames, which was later extended to include the space between shots. Michelson placed the Theory of Intervals within the 'post-Newtonian paradigm' of the 1920s (Michelson, 1992, p. 81). Kino Eye is 'the negative of time' itself and is the 'theory of relativity on the screen' (Michelson, 1992, p. 78). As humans, we are unable to experience either space as curved or the intertwining of space-time. Kino-Eye can show us something that is beyond our senses.

Vertov scholarship is awash with productive discussions on *what* his assumptions of technology were based on. For example, Michelson (1992) and Cook (2007) explore the relation between Vertov and Einstein's Theory of Relativity (Michelson) and its precursor, that is, the theories of W. K. Clifford (Cook). Turvey (1999) studies the relation between the human and the machine and Petric (1987) discusses theories of perception and Vertov's constructivism. There is no need to revisit these discussions. Vertov was very much a man of his time and shared the zeal for the technological and scientific developments of the time with many of his contemporaries including Maholy Nagy and Walter Benjamin.

In a number of these works (Turvey, 1999, for example), discussions on Vertov and the machine are often limited to the film camera. This is a crucial omission. In only referring to the film camera, Vertov's concept of seeing is also limited to how the camera sees. Therefore, Vertov's comparison of the perfect Kino-Eye to the imperfect human vision becomes trite and even ludicrous. A more expanded understanding of Kino-eye to include the *entirety* of cinematic practice encourages an understanding as to why cinematic vision exceeds human ways of seeing. In this way, cinema's mechanical vision becomes about overcoming the spatio-temporal limitation of human vision. In Vertov's own writing he often uses Kino-Eye as a shorthand for a more expanded view of cinematic apparatus:

Kino-Eye is the possibility of seeing life processes in any temporal order or at any speed, inaccessible to the human eye.

Kino-eye uses every possible means in montage, comparing and linking all points of the universe in any temporal order, breaking, when necessary, all the laws and conventions of film construction (Vertov & Michelson, 1984, p. 88).

Vertov regrets that most films fail to take advantage of cinematic technologies and only show what is already visible. They merely reproduce the visible world and limit the ability of the technologies, reducing them 'to a state of pitiable slavery, of subordination to the imperfections and the shortsightedness of the human eye' (Vertov & Michelson, 1984, p. 14). For Vertov it is essential to show what is hidden:

Thus, kino-eye, from the very moment of its conception, was not a matter of trick effects, or of kino-eye for its own sake. Slow-motion filming was understood as the opportunity to make the invisible visible, the unclear clear, the hidden manifest, the disguised overt, the acted nonacted, untruth truth (Vertov & Michelson, 1984, p. 131).

All aspects of cinematic technologies must be employed, but the most important to Vertov were the technologies related to movement, mobility, automation and to the compression and expansion of time and space – aspects that to him were extra-human:

The mechanical eye, the camera, rejecting the human eye as crib sheet, gropes its way through the chaos of visual events, letting itself be drawn or repelled by movement, probing, as it goes, the path of its own movement. It experiments, distending time, dissecting movement, or, in contrary fashion, absorbing time within itself, swallowing years, thus schematizing processes of long duration inaccessible to the normal eye (Vertov & Michelson, 1984, p. 19).

In *Man with a Movie Camera*, Vertov celebrated cinema's ability to see the unseen – in fact the film functions as a signifier for this very ability. The film begins in the early hours of the morning; the world is asleep but not Kino-eye. Kino-eye can show any aspect of life, from witnessing birth, to death, marriage and divorce. The city in the film is a montage of Kiev, Moscow and Odessa – an über-city, only realised through Kino-Eye.

Automation suggests activities that can happen without human intervention/perception. There are many such sequences in the film, from cinema chairs opening and closing on their own to an animated sequence of a camera mounting itself on a tripod and walking away. In what is the film's most audacious celebration of movement, an extreme high-speed and inscrutable image is shown projected onto a cinema screen in a full auditorium. This image is then slowed down and it becomes three dancing bands of electronic light. Movement is the very stuff of cinema it asserts to a roomful of immovable patrons. The image they are seeing is simply an image of movement without any referent.

The very first shot of *Man with a Movie Camera* is of a gigantic camera above which is superimposed a tiny image of Mikhail Kaufman filming with another camera in another direction. Shots of a camera and camera operator loom gigantically over a crowded square, and appear in a glass of beer, high above the city on a bridge, right under a railway carriage – the camera is literally performing the impossible. In contrast, shots of Svilova, Vertov's wife and editor, and the editing process are far less dramatic, but the way the film manages temporal and spatial jumps is a testament to the wonders of montage. On a website of a recent participatory video project remaking *Man With a Movie Camera*, a blogger remarks that the point of montage in the film is to hint at what is unknown as montage insists that:

... a further fragment is always implied: the one you wonder might be waiting on your phone or hard drive, the one you might go out and make now. This putative fragment is just the first of an endless number of presumptive shots you now know are hovering at the edges of possibility, stretching the polygenetic, tessellated [sic] sequences out through both dimensions of now and next (Mendez, 2011).

Subtraction as purification

All movements that purport to the new have begun with purification on some level; with the need to cleanse themselves of all that is corrupting from the past. In his *The Century* (2007), a tour de force reading of the unfinished 20th century, Badiou identifies purification as its defining ethos, an ethos that can be identified with the filmmaking practice of Vertov (a point made by the book's translator, Alberto Toscano, in his commentary).

This ethos is perhaps best exemplified by Clement Greenberg's notion of artistic purification, in which art is condensed to the limitations of its medium. For Greenberg, this is the natural course of all artistic movements which leads to abstraction (Greenberg & O'Brian, 1986, p. 32).

However, the teleology of abstraction as the end point of purification is rejected by both the practices of Badiou and Vertov. For both, purification is an essential start but there must never be the surrender to purity. Purification is a process that does not lead to purity as its end point. Both Badiou and Vertov advocate, in absolute contradistinction to Greenberg, the holding to aspects of the real, what Badiou calls 'minimal difference' and Vertov refers to as 'life'.

Badiou: Towards Minimal Difference

Badiou identifies purification or what he calls 'the passion for the real' as the defining ethos of the 20th century; a passion most evident in politics – especially of that practiced by Lenin – and in art, that of the avant-gardes. The passion for the real attempts to purify the real from the reality that envelops and conceals it. This purifying desire has two forms, one destructive and the other subtractive. The destructive path is the totalising desire to destroy anything that does not match up to a conception of the real, a desire that quickly finds an end point in terror. Badiou emphatically asserts that this path is exhausted. But the 20th century also showed another way – a methodology that we can take into the 21st century. This path:

... the one that attempts to hold onto the passion for the real without falling for the paroxysmal charms of terror – is what I call the subtractive path: to exhibit as a real point, not the destruction of reality, but minimal difference. To purify reality, not in order to annihilate it at its surface, but to subtract it from its apparent unity so as to detect within it the minuscule difference, the vanishing term that constitutes it ...It is ... in this immanent exception, that all the affect lies (Badiou & Toscano, 2007, p. 65).

Badiou's famous example of an art work that succeeds in isolating the minimal difference, the gap between the real and surface reality, is Malevich's *White on White* (1918). This painting purifies itself not only from objective reality but also *almost* from line and colour. It moves as close to the void as possible before it is simply a blank canvas. It isolates the minimal difference which is 'the abstract difference of ground and form, and above all, the null difference between white and white, the difference of the Same' (Badiou & Toscano, 2007, p. 55).

Neither Malevich nor Badiou, however, demonstrate a teleology à la Greenberg. In Malevich's thinking, purification is a core strategy but not an endpoint, and this is illustrated in his *Black Square* first painted in 1915. This was the painting that Malevich claimed determined 'the principal pinnacle from which [he] look[ed] down and examine[d] all the creations of the material world' (Malevich & Andersen, 1971, p. 127).

Malevich was aware that with the *Black Square* he was creating a new direction in art:

The square is not a subconscious form. It is the creation of intuitive reason. The face of the new art. The square is a living, regal infant. It is the first step of pure creation in art. Before it, there were naive deformities and copies of nature (Malevich & Andersen, 1971, p. 38).

The *Black Square* affirms that the Suprematist desire is to purify painting from any representative relation to the object. But if that was all that Malevich achieved, the result is simply negative. Malevich's subtractive move returns painting to the barest minimum. The *Black Square* is thus a symbolic source from which it is possible to create other works of Suprematism. For Lissitzky, Malevich's disciple, the *Black Square* 'has begotten a new conception of space' (Lissitzky, 2003, p. 319).

In exhibitions, the *Black Square* always occupied the position usually reserved for religious icons – high in a corner between two walls. From this position, it looked down at all the other Suprematist paintings, more complex ones, borne from it. For Malevich 'art should not proceed towards reduction or simplification, but towards complexity' (Malevich & Andersen, 1971, p. 22).

Vertov: Thinking Cinema on its Own Terms

For Vertov, cinema must free itself from the conventions established by its principal founder, D. W. Griffith. Cinema must be remade 'as if the studios, the directors, Griffith, Los Angeles, had never existed' (Vertov, 2004, p. 119). Vertov insists that cinema rethink its relations to its own history and to the other arts.

Purification, for Vertov, primarily meant severing cinema's relation to theatre and the script. Cinema had to assert its uniqueness by isolating its minimal difference from the other arts, that is, isolating its ability to record and organise life. However, purification for Vertov, as it was for Malevich, was only a starting point in cinema. Vertov demonstrated this with the complex films that he made.

Vertov's views on the need to purify cinema were very much part of the strident debates at the beginning of the 20th century about whether cinema was in actual fact an art form. Cinema's reliance on imaging technology made it suspect. In order to establish cinema as art, film artists and theorists related it to the theatre, to writing and to music – disassociating its connection with pure recording. Canudo, despite his own particular dislike of films that were theatrical or novelistic, saw cinema's power in its ability to aggregate all the other six arts (Canudo, 1988, p. 293).

Vertov, on the other hand, wanted to assert cinematic autonomy protesting against the 'mixing of the arts which many call synthesis ... produc[ing] not white, but mud' (Vertov & Michelson, 1984, p. 7). For Vertov, cinema's greatness lay not in its ability to aggregate but in its own uniqueness. He wanted to think cinema purely in and of itself.

For a number of thinkers of early cinema, another way to consider cinema as art was to essentialise the connection of the other arts to everyday life. They argued that since cinema is grounded in everyday life, it must also be an art. Thus, for Canudo, Revol, Sauvage and others, the documentary was the highest form of cinema (Aitken, 2001, pp. 72-73) because it was what made cinema into an art *like* the other arts. The "mission of documentary" was 'fondre la vie de l'homme dans la vie des milieux' (to show man's relationship with the world around him)' (Canudo, 1923, p. 2 as cited in Aitken, 2001, p. 73). Vertov though, as mentioned previously, took a firm stand against this view:

'Art and Everyday Life', interests us less than the topic, say, of 'Everyday Life and the Organization of Everyday Life', since, I repeat, it's precisely in this latter area that we work and consider it proper to do so (Vertov & Michelson, 1984, p. 47).

For Vertov, cinema had a direct connection to life and therefore was not like the other arts, which were merely 'surrogates for life'. However, what made cinema unique was not only its relation to reality, its very ability to record life, but also how it could *organise* everyday life. We know from Vertov's cinematic practice that 'organise' did not mean simply structuring but also experimenting and creating links that hitherto were not there. Cinema was able to take 'life facts' and create something totally new through both recording and editing.

Despite the great strides made in music, painting, writing and theatre in the early years of the Soviet Union, Vertov's attitude to them was dismissive. Theatre, including the work of Meyerhold, was reserved for the utmost vilification:

... while the theater is almost always just a lousy imitation of that same life, plus an idiotic conglomerate of balletic affectation, musical squeaks, tricks of lighting, stage sets (from daubs to constructivism), and occasionally the work of a talented writer distorted by all that nonsense. Certain masters of the theater are destroying the theater from within, shattering old forms, and advancing new slogans for theatrical work; to further their rescue they've enlisted biomechanics (in itself a worthy pursuit), and cinema (honor and glory to it), and writers (not bad in themselves), and constructions (there are some good ones), and automobiles (how can one not admire the automobile?), and gunfire (something dangerous and impressive at the front); and by and large not a damned thing comes of it (Vertov & Michelson, 1984, p. 20).

While it is necessary to reject Vertov's unwarranted total dismissal of other arts, it is essential to recognise that his fundamental point of cinema rethinking its relation to the other arts is an

important one. Theatricality, writing, music and design dominate cinema and has resulted in a uniformity that is symptomatic. Vertov made the same point:

Few people see clearly as yet that nontheatrical cinema ... does not exist... The essential thing in theater is acting, and so every motion picture constructed upon a scenario and acting is a theatrical presentation, and that is why there are no differences between the productions by directors of different nuances.

All of this lies outside the genuine purpose of the movie camera –the exploration of the phenomena of life (Vertov & Michelson, 1984, p. 69).

Vertov targeted the screenplay because he felt it limited ‘the exploration of the phenomena of life’ (Vertov & Michelson, 1984, p. 69) by determining a film’s trajectory. To Vertov it was impossible to presuppose to know life by writing it, before an encounter with it with Kino-Eye. A film for him cannot be made through ‘some ‘ideal plan’, removed from life, some script, written in an armchair, that makes no use of productive forces, instruments of production, the ability to employ specific conditions of a specified time and place’ (Vertov & Michelson, 1984, p. 219). For him the script limited the ability of a filmmaker to experiment, to consider ‘the graphic, poetic organization of ... observations’ (Vertov & Michelson, 1984, p. 219).

Conclusion: Thinking beyond the negative

There are inherent dangers of a subtractive methodology. By way of a conclusion, I will discuss its principal hazard – the sway of the negative. A truly subtractive practice cannot be one that is simply in opposition to dominant practices. An oppositional practice is coextensive with the dominant practice, not its obverse. It justifies its existence *through* the dominant practice. Having fundamentally nothing to offer on its own, an oppositional practice quickly becomes exhausted and terminates in a dead end, or becomes coopted into the dominant. It is not possible to ‘create a space of liberty cut from the same cloth as that of the existing powers themselves. That which goes by the name “resistance”, in this instance, is only a component of the progress of power itself’ (Badiou in Bosteels, 2011, p. 336).

For Badiou, the essential (subtractive) philosophical and political task today is to think a new logic that emphasises affirmation over negation. Attempts in the past to think out of the aporia of negation, are, for Badiou, dead ends. For example, the hyper-negation of Adorno (negative dialectics) only leads to the veneration of suffering as the primal activity of thought. Badiou also rejects the pure affirmation of Negri and others that raise the movement of life itself as the model for thought. Both of these attempts are easily assimilated into Capitalist domination. Badiou wishes to propose a logical framework beyond pure negation or pure affirmation. His key to doing this is to think of affirmation as primary and of negation as coming after affirmation. Badiou’s name for this new dialectics is ‘subtraction’.

For Badiou, novelty, starts with the event. However, the event itself is not the creation of a new world – it is a cut, a rupture, that provides the *possibility* of transformation. The event disappears leaving a trace that induces subjective affirmation. The old world is destroyed through the affirmation of the subject. The negative movement of the dialectic arrives after the affirmation. Negation is the consequence of the affirmation. Negation is necessary (every creation implies some aspect of destruction) but is secondary. A world is transformed but not simply by destroying the old order:

Let us not underestimate the fact that there is something that appears as such and that in a way was not there before, so that there is a supplementation, or a creation, a positive dimension, and that remains the point around which everything hangs together. But, at the same time, we would not understand what is at issue if we did not see that this supernumerary element has a completely deregulating function in the regime of appearance of the situation and, thus, in a certain sense, it does destroy something after all; namely, it destroys a regime of existence, if I can say so, which was previously given (Badiou & Bosteels, 2005, p. 249).

Vertov was frequently unable to cross the impasse of the negative. He simply dismissed attempts by other filmmakers and artists to ally themselves to Kino-Eye. This resulted in many missed opportunities to extend the impact of Kino-Eye and to present a bulwark against its enemies. For example, when Alexander V. Fevral'sky, a prominent art critic who wrote on the works of Meyerhold and Mayakovsky and was a great supporter of Kino-Eye, wanted to establish a laboratory extending the lessons of Kino-Eye to other art forms, Vertov sternly and publicly dismissed him. Again, when the effects of Kino-Eye were spreading, Vertov simply refused to acknowledge any other understanding of it except his own.

Despite Vertov's own intractability, there are moments in both his writings and especially in his films when he is able to offer an insightful way of thinking beyond the negative. Even though Vertov hated performance and theatre, there are numerous staged sequences, including staged interviews and possibly scripted sequences (Hicks, 2007, p. 29) in most of his films. The famous sequence of Mikhail Kaufman, Vertov's brother and cinematographer, parodying last minute saves where he is filming under a train and gets away just in time in *Man with a Movie Camera*, is just one of many. These examples are not given to point out the inconsistencies of Vertov or his expedience but to demonstrate that it is possible to utilise performance or writing if they do not diminish cinematic investigation.

Despite Vertov's violent pronouncements, there is plenty of evidence in his filmmaking to show how his practice is indeed subtractive, thinking beyond the negative. The films construe the relation to elements from other arts and to cinematic devices through their service to cinematic experimentation. Because, Kino-Eye is committed to finding what is truly cinematic (the affirmative aspect of Vertov's practice), rejecting (or using) devices (the negative aspect) is secondary.

In recent history, subtraction, as thinking beyond the sway of the negative, away from its seizure by the hegemony of dominant practices, is most common in its political manifestation, 'the politics of subtraction'. Subtractive politics seeks autonomy from the capitalist mode of production and the neoliberal state through moving beyond the concept of revolution which forces the suture of politics to capital and the neoliberal state. It is generally understood as the idea of achieving a society 'that will find a principle of existence that would be entirely "subtracted" from the crushing weight of the relations of power and wealth, and therefore another distribution of human activity' (Badiou, Del Lucchese & Smith, 2008). In practice, this usually translates into politics operating at a distance from the neoliberal state, in interstitial spaces which the state ignores or has little influence over. The distance 'protects political practices from being oriented, structured and polarised by the State' (Badiou, et al., 2008).

In art, the many art movements associated with Occupy, including the art works emanating from the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong, are exemplary of a subtractive artistic practice that attempts to subvert the hold of the negative through reconfiguring the artistic act and the art object. The art of Occupy sees no distinction between artistic practice and direct political action in which '*artistic participation [is] a prefiguration of direct democratic participation*' (McKee, 2016, p. 176, italics in original). Both the artistic practice and the art object are not simply resistant discourses but become sources of mobilization.

In raising these examples, what I hope to highlight is that subtractive thinking is not simply a theoretical or historical curiosity; that its contours are visible in contemporary political and art

movements. I would agree with Badiou's final thesis in his *Fifteen Theses on Contemporary Art* (2004) in which he states that 'It is better to do nothing than to contribute to the invention of formal ways of rendering visible that which empire already recognises as existent.' What these contemporary movements demonstrate are practices beyond repetition or resistance. In refusing to follow a course set by empire, these movements are in fact doing *something* – something that we can call subtractive.

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