COM 321, Documentary Form in Film & Television
Notes from and about Barnouw’s *Documentary: A history of the non-fiction film*

### 3. Documentarist as . . . REPORTER

**Definition(s):**

Reportage = dissemination of factual information from one source (typically a journalist) to a large, undifferentiated audience; includes news, newsreels.

**Key Concepts & Issues:**

Whose “truth” is being reported? What is the “news”? (In the case of the Soviet documentarists, it was the “socialist reality.”)

**Key Documentarists:**

Dziga Vertov (nee Denis Kaufman)

Oldest of the three Kaufman brothers, born in the Soviet Union in 1896; all three eventually worked in film.

First, a medical student and futurist poet

Constructed sound montages in his “audio-laboratory”

In 1918, at 22, he became a newsreel editor for the new Bolshevik Cinema Committee; his work using footage of the revolution was disseminated by agit-train to the masses.

The NEP (New Economic Policy, circa 1921) resulted in Vertov’s exposure to more foreign films, and allowed for Soviet content to be exported more readily.

Vertov became a writer, theorist, and producer; his “Council of Three” (Vertov, wife/editor Yelizaveta Svilova, and brother/cameraman Mikhail Kaufman) published manifestos on the role of cinema—traditional narrative film, like religion and theater, was seen as an opiate for the masses, and the task of Soviet film was “to document socialist reality.”

Vertov thought of himself not as propagandist, but as a reporter getting the news out.

His monthly (approx.) film/newsreel *Kino-Pravda* epitomized Vertov’s doctrine—that proletarian cinema must be based on truth, “fragments of actuality” assembled for meaningful impact, and so that the “whole is also a truth.”

His *One Sixth of the World* (1926) was popular and effective in building national esteem; but Vertov’s influence waned as other, narrative films were produced by other Soviet Montage filmmakers (e.g., Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Dovzhenko, etc.); also, Vertov’s documentary style clashed with Stalin’s more controlled and predictable vision of Soviet film.

His great work, *Man with the Movie Camera* (1929) was:

1--a kaleidoscope of daily life (a city symphony? Not quite)
2--a constant self-reflexive reminder that this is a film
3--an “essay on film truth, crammed with tantalizing ironies,” “dazzling in its ambiguities”; The core irony—(a) demonstrates the importance of the reporter as documentarian, and (b) with its expressionistic/formalistic use of trick shots and edits, shows that no documentary can be trusted
4—biographical of Mikhail Kaufman?

Esfir Shub

A Soviet subtitler and editor of foreign films, her passion for documentaries results in *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* (1927), using Tsar Nicholas II’s home movies and other existing footage from 1912-1917; two other such histories followed, also using this “newsreel compilation” style.