

Review of *Vertov, Snow, Farocki: Machine Vision and the Posthuman*

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Abstract

Tomas' book implies that cinematic representation is no longer separate from the thing it represents. Bazin and Kracauer's ultimate dream of cinema becomes a nightmare even Baudrillard may struggle to comprehend. Tomas' book, though, presents these ideas in a measured way, precisely and deliberately considering his key examples.

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Review of David Tomas, *Vertov, Snow, Farocki: Machine Vision and the Posthuman*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2013. 293 pp. ISBN 9781441169150, \$22.99 (hbk)

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A spate of films from the last decade could be called ‘posthuman’ according to a humanist understanding of all other cinema. *I Am Legend*; *The Road*; *28 Days Later*; *I, Robot* – this list is a veritable choose your own apocalypse. The last film in that list takes a slightly different bent in that humanity’s destruction is of its own making. The machines, created by mankind, have taken over. This *Matrix*-esque story-type – inspired in large part by the writings of science-fiction – necessitates changes in the way people perceive cinema, in that a film about technology will doubtless feature technology somehow. How that technology is integrated into the form of film is a current occupation for a number of scholars, including Bruce Isaacs, Garrett Stewart and Steven Shaviro.

It is not only the representation of technology on screen that concerns scholars, but also the way technology has changed the production of media. A posthuman cinema where human operators are unnecessary naturally changes the form, or does it? These themes of form and function are the concern of David Tomas, whose new work extends the writings of Dziga Vertov in attempting to theorise a cinema relatively free of human interaction. Tomas examines the work of Vertov, Canadian experimental video artist Michael Snow, and German filmmaker Harun Farocki. The work of these three filmmakers is observed through lenses cinematic, philosophical, and anthropological. A history of mechanical cinema is traced from the ‘kinok’ philosophy of Vertov, where man and machine became one, through to the purely mechanical,

objective, observational surveillance technologies of the twenty-first century, the products of which comprise Farocki's work. Across this trajectory (of which Snow's *La Region Centrale* is a crucial turning point), film form has undergone something of a rite of passage. Tomas links this transformation to a number of technological events. For example, Chapter 4 examines Snow's *La Region Centrale* according to principles of liminality and identity: in doing so, Snow's film is positioned as a pivot point between various senses of cinema based around technological progression. The film's 'radicality – as measured through machine- and programmed-based automation – was tempered in terms of Snow's "humanism" which was implicitly and symbolically expressed through the form and dimensions of the film's camera-machine system' (p. 135).

La Region Centrale's importance to Tomas' argument is made clear when he looks at Snow's own written introduction to the film, which describes the piece as being '3 hours wide', 'a phenomenon', and 'an agent of revelation' (p. 82). One is reminded of acid-droppers' reactions to Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* or Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon*, where the object itself is removed from its medium, and instead cast into some spectral or transcendental experiential plane. When one can say this of a film, Tomas suggests – as he himself does when he moves on to look at Farocki's experiments – one has found the true posthuman cinema. Having moved through and past the cosmic and into the posthuman, one sees the completely remediated, transmediated image of Farocki's work as the purest of all. This is true machine vision: a gaze untainted by human subjectivity.

Some parts of Tomas' book may focus too heavily on aspects of pedagogy or the modelling of anthropological rites of passage. When, however, one reaches this final segment, Tomas brings the many disparate elements of his research to bear on Farocki's work, and clinches his argument. The audience, to Tomas, is the key to posthumanism, for a piece of

video or film cannot truly be posthuman unless *there is no human to watch it*. '[I]t is the machine itself,' Tomas writes, 'that is its own "spectator," technician, and manager – a radical reflexivity that signals the eclipse of the passive external consuming viewer' (p. 220). The links between Farocki and Snow are manifold, according to Tomas, but it is in the inextricable tying of cinema with labour that the two almost become one. Both films – and both filmmakers – are concerned with labour and society. But where Vertov saw cinema as a metaphor for, and vehicle to present, a working society, Farocki sees the moving image as a key cog within that society. The age of surveillance subsumes video – assumes representation – into its mode of control.

Tomas' ideas are fascinating – certainly the stuff of science fiction. The terrifying implication of his work, though, is that cinematic representation is no longer separate from the thing it represents. Bazin and Kracauer's ultimate dream of cinema becomes a nightmare even Baudrillard may struggle to comprehend. Tomas' book, though, presents these ideas in a measured way, precisely and deliberately considering his key examples. This volume is a must for anyone interested in technology and cinema, or for the greater implications of a society who carries in their pocket the capacity to record and represent the world around them.