A Camera’s View of Soviet Society in Man with a Movie Camera

By Andrey Kurenkov

Dziga Vertov’s last and most radical film experiment, 1929’s *Man with a Movie Camera*, begins with a series of intertitles that end with the following: “This experimental work is made with the intention of constructing a genuine international and absolutely visual language of cinema, on the basis of its total separation from the language of theater and literature” (Petric 40). The separation of the language of cinema from the languages of other artistic media is central to Vertov’s theory and drive as a Soviet avant-garde filmmaker, and was most impactfully expressed by what follows the intertitles in *Man with a Movie Camera*. The movie starts with the opening of a theatre, the entrance of the audience, and then the projection of the movie itself: often frantically edited shots of various aspects of daily Soviet experience and the filmmaking process that noticeably lack any actors, sets, additional intertitles, or even a script. Because of this experimental form, Vertov’s film is at once a commentary on and a part of the histories of both cinematic expression and the Soviet Union. Because it promotes an ambitious argument as to what cinema should fundamentally aspire to be, the film is inextricably linked to the context of the history of cinema at large as well as the history of Soviet experimentation and the “Cinema-Eye” movement specifically. This argumentative intent with regards to cinema history defines the style and content of the film and is reflected in them. However, the style and content were formed not only to express Vertov’s theory of what cinema should be, but also to use this expression of his theory in practice to present a clear and idealized vision of Soviet society and ideology.

Though the opening intertitles of the film correctly state *Man with a Movie Camera* is meant to be an experiment in cinematic expression not reliant on the languages of theatre and literature, this does not capture the larger ambitions of the movie as the culmination of the “Cinema-Eye” movement that Vertov created and led. Vertov stated in “Provisional Instructions to Cinema-Eye Groups” that “Our eye sees very poorly and very little” and that the language of cinema should be specifically applied to “penetrate deeper into the visible world, to explore and record visual phenomena, so that we not forget what happens and what the future must take into account” (109). This amounts to a total rejection of the fictional and narrative-driven cinema as it had developed throughout the world during the 1910s and 1920s in favor of purely documentary filmmaking meant to capture the reality people live in. Appropriately, *Man with a Movie Camera* proudly stands against the predominant trends of how films were made at the time by not having anything even similar to actors performing according to a pre-written script on artificial sets. Instead, the movie is created in accordance with Vertov’s call to record the real world and so is made up almost entirely from shots portraying various typical aspects of life in Soviet cities such bustling city streets, typical shops opening for business, or people at the beach. Though often shot from a distance, the film also shows people up close going about their life on the streets, working, exercising, enjoying their time at a bar, and more. Furthermore, Vertrov follows his own guidelines of not letting the cameraman intrude or disrupt the natural actions of the people being filmed, but rather captures them “unawares.” Additionally, rather than plainly filming events Vertov uses many experimental techniques such as multiple exposure (such as when combining direct shots of dancers with an overhead shot of music being played), slow-motion (when showing the elegance of Soviet athletes), fast-motion (as in the movie’s frantic conclusion), and others to make the movie more impactful. This is consistent with Vertov’s stance on the work of his movement: “We, the ‘kinoks,’ describe ‘film-thing’ as ‘the montage way of seeing.’ ‘Film-thing’-it is the conclusive result of a complete observation refined and deepened by means of all available optical devices” (Petric 37). This is also consistent with his newsreels and other documentaries, which likewise filmed scenes while experimenting with different cinematic approaches that could increase their impact. Therefore, this movie is most notable not for introducing Vertov’s radical position in opposition to the trends at the time, but rather for being the first such movie not relying on intertitles and in so doing completely capturing the ambition for an independent language of cinema (Nesbet). Because of this, *Man with a Movie Camera* is the culmination of experimentation and theory that Vertov and the rest of the Cinema-Eye movement had been cultivating throughout the 1920s and for that alone marks a significant event in movie history.

In addition to the documentary and anti-theatrical intents of *Man with a Movie Camera* that can be plainly seen, it is further significant for directly reflecting on its own mode of production. The only semblance of characters followed throughout the feature is the titular man with a movie camera, who can be seen setting up and getting up many shots, and a film editor who cuts these disparate shots together. Many of the shots taken by the cameraman are woven into the movie itself, and the editor shown is in fact Elizaveta Svilova at work editing *Man with a Movie Camera* (Sergio 5). This inclusion of the movie-making process (one person or many people acquiring footage of reality that another person later combines into a cohesive whole) within the movie itself relates Vertov’s written opinion as to how Cinema-Eye production can be done with a socialist production process: “The Goskino kinoks' cell should be regarded as one of the factories in which the raw material supplied by kinok-observers is made into film-objects“ (117). In showing both the creative process and the actual product of that creative process side by side after having explicitly stated it is an experiment in using pure cinematic language, Vertov makes smartly this movie a radical statement as to how cinema should be made that was itself made that way and now shown to be a successful result. It even underscores underscores its own success by an opening sequence in which a theatre accepts an audience to start watching a movie (an audience being welcomed to see this Cinema-Eye work) and an ending that repeatedly cuts back to pleased audience reactions. As mentioned before, Vertov believed human vision to be limited and thought cinema should have the purpose of “organizing the vision of the Soviet man by means of the "kino-eye," the camera-eye” (Sergio 8). Including the audience within the movie serves to emphasize this purpose and the overall philosophy of the Cinema-Eye movement. Vertov even goes so far as to make the movie’s final shot be of an eye superimposed on a camera shutter (literally a “camera-eye”). These aspects of the movie make it notable not only as the culminative rejection of dominant trends at this point in cinema history but also as a reflexive appraisal for the Cinema-Eye movement and its goals.

In addition to the film-historic significance outlined above, *Man with a Movie Camera* also has clear connections to the social history of the Soviet Union and its development. The entire Cinema-Eye movement that this movie is the culmination of was conceived as a radical and socialist departure from existing cinema of the days before the revolution. Vertov has written of the motivation for Cinema-Eye movement that “Existing cinema, as a commercial affair, like cinema as a sphere of art, has nothing in common with our work” and that “This departure from authorship by one person or a group of persons to mass authorship will, in our view, accelerate the destruction of bourgeois, artistic cinema” (109). Thus, Vertov sought to do away with the bourgeoisie conventions of the past to create a socialist cinema that showed “life as it is” and had an appropriately socialist production process. *Man with a Movie Camera* very transparently follows this intent by directly showing the daily experience of the city populace in the Soviet Union. It is noteworthy that the movie actually tries to follow the “life as it is” philosophy by not glamorizing life in the USSR and including shots of less fortunate citizens that are drunkards and homeless, albeit briefly. Less obviously, it also follows the intent for Cinema-Eye films to no longer act as an “opium of the people” but instead create a “a filmic vision of existing social and economic relations” so as to “furnish by means of cinema a vision of a large, organic experience that can seem fragmentary and disconnected to the naked eye” (Sergio 4). In other words, the Cinema-Eye is meant to be the seen as the eye of the proletariat as a whole entity (one slogan written by Vertov goes “Long live the Cinema-Eye of the proletarian revolution!”(120)), and to show the connectedness between all citizens of the Soviet Union that they as individuals may miss due to their limited vision. This is done in *Man with a Movie Camera* by using a large amount of parallel editing, most noticeably in a scene that cross-cuts between the film editor, miners, factory workers, and a stylist all working with similar machinery. The scene ends with the machinery of each workers superimposed together to make the clear visual impression the workers are working together as part of a larger organism. Another use of cross-cutting also achieves this less obviously by juxtaposing marriage and divorce as well as birth and death, with the impression that the society as a whole undergoes natural organic cycles that all people are part of. Other cinematic techniques reinforce this impression that the people of the Soviet Union are united as well, such as far away long shots of bustling city streets or a busy beach that groups a mass of people into a single whole. The overall structure of the film also emphasizes the organic whole of Soviet society, with a loose progression of waking up, commuting to work, working, and relaxing after the word is finished. The filmis thus at once a product of Soviet ideology and itself about Soviet ideology, and so unmistakably linked to its socio-historical context.

Although creating a vision of unity and oneness are core to the meaning of *Man with a Movie Camera* as it related to Soviet society, the movie also covers another very important topic: the relation between man and machine.The 1920s was a time in which the Soviet union developed the "cult of the machine” (Turvey 8) in a drive towards industrialization and modernization, and this historic development is noticeably reflected in *Man with a Movie Camera*. Even the titlesuggests a crucial connection between workers and their mechanical tools, and the movie as a whole portrays technology as an integral and positive element of the Soviet society. Notable early scenes about technology focus on means of transport as part of the hustle of city life and use framing and cross-cutting to make transport part of the unity of the Soviet people. Likewise, the scene in which many different workers are cross-cut together also represents machinery as being essential to the work by framing shots so as to prominently show the use of machinery as the means of work. Later, the stop of the machinery is shown to signal the end of the work and transition to relaxation. A last notable scene shows a stop-motion animation of a camera moving by itself, which grants it life within the movie and so reiterates the importance of camera mobility and its significance as a sort of social-eye. Due to all these scenes, it is easy to see the “cult of the machine” reflected in Vertov’s vision as the unified society he extols is fundamentally built with and includes within it technology.

*Man with a Movie Camera* is still a radical and revolutionary movie to this day, and has lost none of its historical significance with time. Today as in the past it relates to the larger historical movements of how the standard conventions of cinema developed, how radical movements formed and faded, and how the USSR developed early in its history. It does all this without actors, sets, or scripts and so to this day captures the strength of cinema language.

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