

# Short Paper I

SLAV 723: Soviet and Post-Soviet Russian Cinema

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Lights are dimming down, small chair creaks are getting ever louder in a quieter classroom, the small light illuminating through an ajar door is sent back to the void when the small wooden doorstop is kicked away. Intensifying orchestral music is starting to play with the intro credits of *Man With A Movie Camera* by Dziga Vertov. After finishing the film, everyone knew they felt something and had ideas regarding it. One thing is for sure, it hasn't left anyone indifferent.

The film *Man with a Movie Camera* represents  
AN EXPERIMENTATION IN THE CINEMATIC COMMUNICATION  
WITHOUT THE USE OF INTERTITLES  
WITHOUT THE HELP OF A SCENARIO  
WITHOUT THE HELP OF THEATRE

*Man With A Movie Camera* is almost a silent movie with incredibly fast-paced editing and the unique decision regarding its actors and plot, there is none. Let us traverse through different dimensions of what Dziga Vertov, originally David Abelevich Kaufman wanted us to experience through his work, and decide whether the experimental film stands the test of time with its ideas.

It is almost a silent film because if there is no audible dialogue, we are still greeted by an accompanying soundtrack that shifts and changes depending on current scenes. Interestingly enough, silent film directors usually would write the score, which will be played with every screening. However, Vertov only gave directions for the soundtrack, resulting in the movie

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accumulating over twenty different accompanying scores, each contributing slightly differently.

I watched the film with the musical accompaniment performed by The Alloy Orchestra did a terrific job of keeping the tension up throughout the whole screening. The instruments, pitch, and speed would all change depending on the environment that camera is in or what the camera is currently looking at. Parts with us following a fire truck hauling across town are aided by sirens playing in the background with beating drums, which seem to never get tired.

The second important feature of the film to notice is the apparent lack of a traditional narrative script, possibly a complete absence of it. Rarely this is done, as what we end up with is a movie with no central characters that develop or follow some overarching story that we are supposed to follow and care about. In a similar logical way, one would even dare to claim that *Man With A Movie Camera* is devoid of any meaning, primarily because it doesn't have a plot for us to consciously follow. I would disagree.

What we have in front of us is a film with no actors, but that fact alone doesn't hinder or cripple the effect Dziga Vertov made on us. The absence of a traditional cast allows the movie to follow everyday people in their routine lives. From early morning until late night Soviet citizens are shown at work and play, actively being involved with the bustling urban lifestyle. It is different from a classical narrative structure, as we end up with more of a symphony-like development, where each scene is a whole story of its own.

This closes in tightly with what I believe to be one of the most important and defining features of *Man With A Movie Camera* and that is its use of a hidden camera, which allows us to witness the actuality of a modern life, where modern is defined by the standard of the 1920s. Silent movies of a similar era produced by the likes of Sergei Eisenstein and Lev Kuleshov are meticulously choreographed, where both attempt to force strong emotions with a propaganda-like purpose of affecting the masses in a very specific way.

I personally dislike propaganda or works of art that aims at making me or one of the audience members think and feel in a given way, which would be beneficial to them. Dziga Vertov takes a very interesting approach, as there is no grande moralizing or lecturing tone in his film. It is simply a

collection of real-world footage with real regular people in it. This merely serves as a manifestation of his own views on cinema, which is fully cinematic. Vertov accomplishes at making it real, a literal unplayed film.

This cinematic nature of it with an incredible editing and montage job done by Elizaveta Svilova allows us to formulate our own understanding of the film. This ambiguity in its meaning, for many a complete lack thereof, gives us the freedom and liberty in creating our meaning and attributing it to the movie. With the range of activities and work shown through the work's fast cutting, everyone can find a role that they could relate to in one way or another. I even had a physical sensation when watching people at the beach washing medical mud off their skins. When I was a child, my family went on a trip, which I hold very dear to me, where we tried the "mud cleaning" technique.

A good question that was raised after the screening was - "Is this propaganda? Do you feel you would like to pack your bags and go live in the Soviet Union?". As I mentioned, I don't see it as propaganda, yet I would claim that the work is pro-Soviet. There is an important difference between those two. Propaganda aims at affecting your mind, in many ways forcibly implanting strong emotions towards a subject. Vertov strove to showcase a futuristic city that would serve as a commentary on the ideals of a Soviet citizen while granting us the freedom to decide our emotions regarding it.

Considering that it still would be possible, did I feel like packing my belongings and leaving for good? I would not say so for two reasons. I adore the work ethic and optimism that was shown through the film, where a lady would be doing a tedious manual task of wrapping up tobacco packages, while still talking and presumably laughing at some jokes throughout her work. However, I do not feel I personally share many of the Soviet ideals shown in the movie, but they do have my respect. The second reason is that we are mostly presented with the active urban life, but an overwhelming majority of the Soviet population used to live in more rural areas, where I would imagine the lifestyle was very different.

After an epilepsy-inducing final scene, the end credits simply read **KINEC (END)**. I started applauding because I felt this is what *Man With A Movie Camera* deserves. There was no doubt in my mind that Vertov showed the infinite possibilities of what cinema can be. You just have to let the camera do the talking.