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JIRI KOLAJA and ARNOLD W. FOSTER

“Berlin, the Symphony of a City” as a Theme of Visual Rhythm

WHEN WALTER RUTTMANN made his *Symphony of Berlin* in 1927, the film met with well-deserved attention in the reviews as well as in the discussions of the film-makers themselves. It acted as a signal for the production of similar, more or less poetic documentaries about other European capitals.¹ Among the main topics of deliberation was the rhythm of *Berlin*. In this note we will discuss some of the problems in communicating rhythm in motion pictures, especially as seen in this documentary.²

From the *Encyclopedia of the Arts* we get the following definition of rhythm; “Rhythm means a continuance resulting from reiteration of the same or similar component parts.” “Rhythm suggests . . . the lawful periodicity of every phase of life. . . .”³ Rhythm contains alternation, order, and organization of time or space. It conveys energy; there is the alternation of tension and release, expectation and satisfaction, emphasis and de-emphasis.

The rhythm in painting, architecture, and to some extent in stabile sculpture depends more upon the activity of the receiver in that he can move or not move

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himself or his attention in any direction. In the graphic arts, rhythm requires the movement of attention across the alternations of color, line, and other formal and thematic materials. The so-called rhythm in a painting is really a set of signs and symbols which have been related according to variety and uniformity by the artist, but must be related again by the viewer in order to feel the rhythm.⁴ In music, poetry, and dance the receiver is more passive in that he depends upon the producer to set the tempo.

To a certain extent, the cinema stands between these two. Each shot is like a painting in that it has the pictorial material for the recognition of rhythm within it. At the same time there is usually movement within the shot as well as the shift from shot to shot through time as music shifts from chord to chord.⁵

In film one can create an illusion of sound rhythm by purely visual means. The intent of this article is to demonstrate how this is done in a silent film. The subject matter of this film begins with the morning arrival of a train. Different activities follow—work, shopping, traffic, eating, courting, teaching, sport and leisure, and night life in the big theaters as well as in the little sordid dance halls. There is also present the contrast between the rich and the poor, the contrast between mobility and immobility.

In a feature picture, the rhythm is de-

veloped primarily through the dramatic structure of the story itself. There are the ups and downs in dramatic suspense and relief. This may be designated the dramatic rhythm and it exists at a high level of abstraction. In this the feeling of time can be compressed or stretched. Underlying is a qualitatively different rhythm more directly related to the physical time dimension. The dramatic rhythm depends on whole sets of signs and symbols while the physical rhythm depends immediately on the recurrence of specific sign carriers. Theoretically, one could propose that the absence of narrative in the dramatic rhythm, as in the documentary, calls for a more pronounced elaboration of the physical time rhythm. For example, both films of Pare Lorentz, *River* and *The Plough That Broke the Plains*, have up and down rhythms materialized especially through the forte and vivante of music simultaneously with a quick editing of shots in contrast to the pianissimo and legato of the musical score and longer footage of particular shots.

Theoretically, every element of the moving picture can express the rhythm. Rhythm cannot be perceived without memory. It is clear that the memory for recurring elements is culturally conditioned. Many Asiatic movies (i.e., Japanese) appear to Western audiences as slow. There is a Western predilection for a more rapid and staccato alternation. "Each artist, every people, and every epoch produces a characteristic kind of rhythm."⁶ In medieval times in Europe, the religious plays had a very slow rhythm. Perhaps as a result of our high-speed and mechanical clock-time we no longer tolerate the slower rhythms. Certainly the taste for speed is of recent origin.

Turning our attention again to Ruttman's film, we would like first to present a selected part of the film that struck observers during a normal screening as the most pronounced sequence of a visual-physical rhythm. This part is notable because purely visual means were used to convey the illusion of the sound rhythm of a train. The following table presents 34 shots of the sequence.

In order to facilitate the uncovering of the rhythmic pattern in the first table, we will introduce a symbolic system as presented in Table II.

Table III is a symbolic simplification of Table I. There are three levels of physical rhythm seen in this table. At the first level is the simple rhythm seen in the first three lettered columns. Shots no. 8 through no. 28 are all extremely short shots and it is precisely through this section of the film that regular rhythmic patterns are pronounced. In the column, "Distance of Shot," there is a one-two, one-two beat (C-A, C-A) resulting from the alternation of the close-up with the longer shots. There is a change in the one-two rhythm starting with shot number 17. Note that this break makes a cross rhythm with the material in the "Direction of Movement" column. This is discussed more fully below.

In the column representing the "Subject" there is also the one-two, one-two beat (GI-H, GI-F, GI-H, GI-F), with pictures of wires or of poles alternating with railroad tracks which appear in each fourth picture and with engine wheels which appear in the alternate fourth shots.

In the "Direction of Movement" column, the rhythm follows a one-two-three-four, one-two-three-four pattern. In three shots the movement is from left to right (symbol C). Symbol B represents movement toward the camera and in shot 13 there is a full view of the wheels in movement (D). There is only one shot (number 16) in which the movement goes from right to left. The consistency in the direction of movement is necessary if the illusion of movement in the film is to be evoked and maintained.

If the close-up (A), which is the most regular item in the "Distance of Shot" column, can be considered the strong beat, and if the wires or poles (GI and IG) are considered the strong beat in the "Subject" column, then one gets the sense of a cross rhythm as seen in Table IV.

The most constantly repeated items are underlined. An examination of Table III shows that this pattern is consistent throughout the section under scrutiny.

TABLE I
First Sequence of Shorts from Ruttmann's *Berlin, the Symphony of a City*

Number and Distance of Shot	Subject	Direction of Movement	Footage
1. C.U.	Water	Still	7 feet
2. C.U.	Abstract pattern	"	12 "
3. L.S.	Railroad barriers	Towards camera	22 frames
4. M.S.	Train	Left to right	60 "
5. C.U.	Windows of the train	" " "	1 foot
6. M.S.	" " " "	" " "	1 "
7. M.S.	Railroad tracks	Towards camera	1 "
8. M.S.	Telephone wires	Left to right	5 frames
9. C.U.	Engine wheels	" " "	5 "
10. M.S.	Telephone wires	" " "	8 "
11. C.U.	Railroad tracks	Towards camera	6 "
12. M.S.	Telephone wires	Left to right	8 "
13. C.U.	Engine wheels	Circular	7 "
14. L.S.	Wires and poles	Left to right	9 "
15. C.U.	Railroad tracks	Towards camera	7 "
16. M.S.	Wires and poles	Right to left	8 "
17. C.U.	Engine wheels	Left to right	7 "
18. M.S.	Wires and poles	" " "	8 "
19. M.S.	Railroad tracks	Towards camera	5 "
20. M.S.	Wires	Left to right	8 "
21. C.U.	Wheels	" " "	9 "
22. M.S.	Wires	" " "	9 "
23. M.S.	Railroad tracks	Towards camera	7 "
24. M.S.	Wires	Left to right	6 "
25. C.U.	Wheels	" " "	8 "
26. M.S.	Wires	" " "	9 "
27. C.U.	Railroad tracks	Towards camera	7 "
28. M.S.	Wires	Left to right	7 "
29. M.S.	Telephone poles	" " "	86 "
30. L.S.	Signal house	" " "	2 feet
31. L.S.	Ports and scenery	" " "	2 "
32. C.U.	Buffers	Static	50 frames
33. L.S.	From the window of the train	Left to right	2 feet
34. M.S.	Poles and wires	" " "	2 "

C.U. = close-up shot
M.S. = medium shot
L.S. = long shot

The cross rhythm which results avoids too strong an emphasis on either the even- or odd-numbered shots. The effect is possibly to promote a smooth sense of motion which fits better the actual rhythm of a train ride.

There is variation in the cross rhythm patterns too. In the "Direction of Movement" column, the disjunctive right to left movement in shot number 16 seems to introduce a change in the "Direction of Shot" pattern. What results is a new cross rhythm between those two elements as seen in Table V.

The first cross rhythm followed a duple or one-two pattern. This one follows a

quadruple pattern in which the accents of each element fall in the middle of the other element grouping of four.

Returning to Table III one can see that the most repeated combination of the four elements is one in which very short medium shot is used with wires shown moving from left to right. This combination occurs in the even-numbered shots 8 to 28 with the only exceptions being numbers 14 and 16.

Although the above analysis is plausible, another point about the structure of the rhythm is in order here. In two elements the rhythm is one-two, one-two, but the ONE-two-three-four rhythm of the third

TABLE II
A List of Symbols to Represent Elements in the Analyzed Film Shots

Symbol	Distance	Subject	Direction of Movement	Footage
A	C.U.	Water	Still	80+ frames
B	L.S.	Abstract pattern	Towards camera	5 to 39 frames
C	M.S.	Railroad barriers	Left to right	50 to 79 frames
D		Train	Circular	
E		Windows of the train	Right to left	
F		Railroad tracks		
GI		Telephone wires		
H		Engine wheels		
IG		Wires and poles		
J		Telephone poles		
K		Signal house		
L		Ports and scenery		
M		Buffers		
N		From the train window		

Note: The symbols used were arbitrary. They were merely selected according to the sequence of the elements they represent. Any other system of notation would prove as useful. Telephone wires GI and wires and poles IG have a same combination of letters. In doing this we try to convey the fact that pictures within these two shots are very similar and can be considered as one pictorial category.

element indicates that the total rhythm can be conceived as a composite rhythm. Note that two divides into four, and therefore both can be combined to accent certain repetitions. It is questionable whether one could introduce an irregular or triple rhythm here without losing the rhythmic sense. Our thesis is that rhythm composed of visual elements must, as in music, become rather complex in order to sustain interest. The complexity and the introduction of variants into the pattern convey a strong sense of rhythmic motion, but does not tire and bore the viewer as a simple alternation of the same two shots might. There is nothing in the above proposition that would prevent an introduction of another element, e.g., a particular color could appear in each eighth shot (two and four divide into eight) to keep the composite rhythm regular.

While the above analysis of shots numbers 8-28 represents well the physical rhythm, the sequences numbers 1-7 and numbers 29-34 become rhythmic units when compared to the 8-28 sequence. We are beginning to move away from the immediate identity with the physical rhythm toward a dramatic rhythm which emerges on a higher level of abstraction. The 1-7 and the 29-34 sections comprise units

which tend to introduce and remove the rapid physical rhythm of the 8-28 sequence.

If we move even further away from the physical rhythm of individual shots, the whole film appears to be comprised of three distinct parts. First is the part we have already analyzed, the departure of a suburban train toward Berlin. All shots are controlled by the dominant one-directional movement of the object (the train). The second part is the city itself, consisting of contradiction in movement, from left to right, from right to left, forwards and backwards. Also, one can find here contrast and diversity with shots of immobile objects juxtaposed with racing traffic. The third and last part shows Berlin at night. There is a tendency to photograph movement from above, exhibiting the circular movement of dancing people, of tumblers, of a circular neon sign, of a merry-go-round, of a roulette wheel. The circular movement is a suggestion of an insoluble situation often used by the expressionists on the stage, and it was later also used in the film.

Finally, when one compares the whole film of *Berlin* with the above mentioned Cavalcanti's *Rien que les heures*, one cannot but find Ruttmann's product com-

paratively detached. Ruttmann is not interested in the people of his Berlin but in the magnificent pattern of movement which Berlin offers to him. Cavalcanti, on the other hand, follows certain unknown people and shows their little tragedies, and thus gets us involved in the story.

A viewing of Ruttmann's *Berlin* gave in the sequence of the ride into the city a strong sense of the sound of the train. In attempting to find out how it was done, we centered our attention on those elements which seemed to translate visual images into sound experience. The analysis fo-

TABLE III
A Sequence of Shots from Ruttmann's *Berlin, the Symphony of a City*, Symbolically Charted

Number of Shot	Distance of Shot	Subject	Direction of Movement	Footage
1.	A	A	A	A
2.	A	B	A	A
3.	B	C	B	B
4.	C	D	C	C
5.	A	E	C	C
6.	C	E	C	C
7.	C	F	B	C

8.	C	GI	C	B
9.	A	H	C	B
10.	C	GI	C	B
11.	A	F	B	B
12.	C	GI	C	B
13.	A	H	D	B
14.	B	IG	C	B
15.	A	F	B	B
16.	C	IG	E	B
17.	A	H	C	B
18.	C	IG	C	B
19.	C	F	B	B
20.	C	GI	C	B
21.	A	H	C	B
22.	C	GI	C	B
23.	C	F	B	B
24.	C	GI	C	B
25.	A	H	C	B
26.	C	GI	C	B
27.	A	F	B	B
28.	C	GI	C	B

29.	C	J	C	A
30.	B	K	C	C
31.	B	L	C	C
32.	A	M	A	C
33.	B	N	C	C
34.	C	IG	C	C

TABLE IV
A Short Section of *Berlin* Demonstrating a Cross Rhythm

Number of Shot	Distance of Shot	Subject
25.	A	H
26.	C	GI
27.	A	F
28.	C	GI

TABLE V
A Short Section of *Berlin* Demonstrating a Second Cross Rhythm

Number of Shot	Distance of Shot	Direction of Movement
16.	C	E
17.	A	C
18.	C	C
19.	C	B
20.	C	C
21.	A	C
22.	C	C
23.	C	B
24.	C	C

cused on rhythmic themes as the common denominator of sound and vision, and we discovered that the patterns were rather complex but actually built up out of simple alternations which were pyramided into the staccato final effect. There was a brief statement about the use of dramatic time to create an overall rhythm which is at a high level of abstraction. We have shown how qualitatively the physical rhythm is gradually changed into a qualitatively different dramatic rhythm. The motion picture, using machines as tools, seems admirably suited to demonstrate the dominant rhythm of modern culture.⁷

¹ See a similar film on Paris, *Rien que les heures*, produced by Cavalcanti.

² For a discussion of the documentary film as a type, see Roger Manvell, *Film* (London, Penguin Books, 1944), pp. 80 ff.

³ *Encyclopedia of the Arts*, eds. Dagobert Runes and Harry G. Schrickel (N. Y., Philosophical Library, 1946), p. 855.

⁴ The concept of rhythm in the pictorial arts sometimes seems to refer more to the implied motion of the subject content. For example, in Wallace S. Baldinger's *Visual Arts* (New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960) the discussion of rhythm is much

like our own. The photographs illustrating rhythm are a) a bucking bronco and rider and b) a nude. The organic reference of curvilinear motion is what strikes the eye. Piet Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie Woogie* in the Museum of Modern Art illustrates better the rapid mechanical rhythm we discuss in this paper.

⁵ See Arnold Hauser, *Social History of Art* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951), II, 939-947, for a discussion of space and time in the modern arts.

⁶ *Encyclopedia of the Arts*, p. 855

⁷ See Jiri Kolaja, *K Problematice Filmu*, (Prague, 1948). (In Czech.)