

Guide to *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929)



The camera eye sees all

What's it about?

Man with a Movie Camera isn't 'about' something in the generally accepted sense. Instead this silent film follows a cameraman as he travels around Russia and Ukraine in the late 1920s, filming the life of its people on the beach, in factories, and walking through the cities. The film can be set to two different soundtracks; the first, performed by the Alloy Orchestra, is close to writer/director Dziga Vertov's notes on musical accompaniment. The other, In the Nursery's 2003 version, is as progressive now as Vertov's film was in 1929.

By showing the filmmaker and rarely the film he makes, Vertov creates a canvas to explore the ways in which film presents reality. He displays his extraordinary repertoire of filming and editing techniques including double and triple exposure, split shots, fast and slow motion, and dissolves. Rather than a conventional narrative, Vertov and his wife Elizaveta Svilova, who edited the film, depict an artform's advancement in the hands of one of its most profound visionaries.

Who made it?

Writer and director Vertov was born Denis Abramovich Kaufman in Poland in 1896. In 1918 he moved to Russia to study music, experimenting with sounds from this very early stage. As his influence in Russian cinema grew, he changed his professional name to Dziga Vertov, literally meaning 'the humming top'. A Marxist, Vertov saw documentary cinema as a means of fighting "film drama [which] is the opium of the people".

Elizaveta Svilova edited the film and her role and importance can be seen in a scene in which an editor cuts, splices and catalogues reams of (presumably Vertov's) footage. Having edited this film, she later co-directed with her husband and was eventually awarded the Stalin Prize, an accolade never afforded to her husband.

Backstory

Early in his directorial career, Vertov experimented with the use of short clips, paying little attention to continuity of time, place or character. Instead, he focussed on the overall effect of the clips (known as “montage”) and on the techniques he developed to present the reality he saw. The Soviet authorities disliked this experimental attitude and took particular issue with *Man with a Movie Camera*. He was forced to go to Ukraine to get the film made at all.

Vertov saw the camera as superior to the human eye and capable of showing absolute truth. He helped found a group of filmmakers and film experts called the “Kinoks”. They were devoted to depicting cinema of the truth rather than the ‘staged’ narratives that were popular then and are still now. *Man with a Movie Camera* arguably represents the crossover point at which Vertov’s ideology begins to contradict his practice.

The production

Growing ever more unpopular with the Stalinist government of the 1920s, Vertov was forced abroad to nearby Ukraine to finish production and post-production of his greatest work. This represented the start of his fall from grace with the Soviet Party officials and resulted in his removal from the frontline of artistic film-making.

It is rumoured that having shot thousands upon thousands of clips, Vertov left it to his wife to collate all the material and build some sort of narrative cohesion. The editing is one of the key aspects of the film that make it so important.

The reviews

The fast pace and innovation of Vertov’s imagery unsettled some viewers that were unaccustomed to it: “[Vertov] does not take into consideration the fact that the human eye fixes for a space of time that which holds the attention.”

New York Times, 1929

“Vertov’s masterpiece was way ahead of its time. Using more split screen, frame framing, break neck editing then MTV could shake a corporate stick at.”

BBC, 2003

What happened next?

With the advance of sound cinematography, Vertov was able to expand his poetic exploration of Soviet life to include montages of sound, not just images. He would win international acclaim for this with *Enthusiasm: Donbass Symphony* (1931).

Vertov's films came under increasing censorship in Soviet Russia, as they failed to sufficiently flatter the rising cult of Stalin. Vertov would spend the last 20 years of his career editing news reels as fictional film-making became the favoured medium of the conservative government.

The ideals of the Kinok groups were not lost however, and would re-emerge in the Danish Dogme movement of 1990s which refused expensive film-making gimmicks in a 'Vow of Chastity'.

Look out for

Examples of the following techniques:

- Double and triple exposure
- Freeze frames
- Fast motion and slow motion
- Jump cut
- Split screens
- Dutch angles
- Extreme close ups
- Tracking shots
- Stop motion

Talking points

- What was your favourite sequence in the film and why?
- Was there a story in the film?
- From this film, would you like to live in Soviet Russia?