

Man with a Movie Camera

(1929, Dziga Vertov, USSR)

Component 2: Global Filmmaking Perspectives (AL)

Core Study Areas: Key Elements of Film Form Meaning & Response The Contexts of Film

Specialist Study Area: Critical Debates (AL)

Rationale for study

Dziga Vertov is described by S.M. Eisenstein as a 'film hooligan' producing 'unmotivated camera mischief'. He made *Man with a Movie Camera* as 'a visual symphony', a self-reflexive film about the making of the film. As a self-proclaimed 'experiment in the cinematic communication of visible events' it is an exhilarating, dynamic, collective experience about the life and rhythm of a city, in which the spectator plays an active role as both subject and audience.

STARTING POINTS - Useful Sequences and timings/links

Life and work: an accident, ambulance, fire engine, manual work, cleaning, sewing 0:31:53

Leisure: activity, watching 0:45:44 - 0:55:58

CORE STUDY AREAS 1 - STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

Cinematography

- Vertov used many cinematic techniques and effects that emphasized the contrived nature of the film. These included double exposure, superimposition, animation, speeded up action, freeze frame, reverse motion, overlapping motion, split screen techniques, slow motion, stop motion.
- The film consists of approximately 1,775

separate shots, average shot length 2.3 seconds. Vertov's brother Mikhail Kaufman is the man with a movie camera who goes to great lengths to get his shots recording life in the Soviet Union – climbing, riding in cars and on a motorcycle, lying under the railway tracks.

- The stress on film as a constructed artefact starts with an empty cinema and ends with the cameraman rushing the film to the projectionist. We constantly see the shots being reproduced by a camera with its lens as an eye and it also becomes animated fitting itself together, putting itself on a tripod and walking around.

Mise-en-Scène

- A 'city symphony' but not just one city but a mixture of Odessa, Moscow and Leningrad. The film begins with morning, the city wakes up. People go about their daily tasks, traffic fills the street. As the day progresses all aspects of human life are covered – birth, marriage, divorce, death, work, leisure.
- Images of hands performing various tasks: cleaning, sorting, folding, editing the film. Parallel sequences: woman washing herself, washing a window paper, newspapers flowing from a printing press, water flowing over a dam.
- Children eagerly watch performances, we see their participation and then stills, photographs of their participation. Cinema brings them to life.

Editing

- The film jump cuts between action and watching action. Freeze frames on a strip of celluloid are examined by editor Elizaveta Svilova.
- Dissolves, split screen: hands playing piano, dancers. Double exposure of the Bolshoi the bourgeois home of pre-revolutionary ballet and opera which splits into two and collapses in on itself.
- End of the film 90 shots at 2 frames each - eyes, train, crowd, metronome, traffic signal.

CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS – Meaning & Response

Representations

- Different images of work, routine, rhythm, repetition. Images industry, traffic, machinery, recreation, faces. Theme of production demystify the film making process, film as just another object that is mass produced and then consumed by workers.
- Opening title, the only one in the film *'This film presents an experiment in the cinematic communication of visible events/ without the aid of intertitles/without the aid of a scenario/ without the aid of theatre/the experimental work aims at creating a truly international absolute language of cinema based on its total separation from the language of theatre and literature'*.
- Importance of women to the life of the Soviet Union. Seen giving birth, dancing, doing heavy and dirty manual work, washing, sewing, styling their hair and putting on make up.

Aesthetics (i.e. the 'look and feel' of the film including visual style, influences, auteur, motifs)

- Denis Arkadieivitch Kaufman adopted the name Dziga Vertov which means 'turning', 'revolving' as an expression of the dynamism of everyday revolutionary life. He studied medicine for a short time, wrote poetry/ music/science fiction before becoming a lifelong advocate of the documentary film.
- Manifesto *Kinok's (Kino Eye) Revolution* written in 1923 *'I am the cinema-eye. I am a mechanical eye. I, a machine, can show you the world as only I can see it. From today I liberate myself forever from human immobility, I am in perpetual motion... my way leads to the creation of a fresh perception of the world. And this is how I can decipher a new world unknown to you.'* Machinery, people, actions, rhythm.
- Repeated circular motions Union – camera hand cranked, cameraman rides around and around track, merry-go-round, spinning wheel.

CORE STUDY AREAS 3 - STARTING POINTS – Contexts

Social

- In 1929 the Soviet Revolution into and beyond its first decade. Ideas about the role of the new Soviet Citizen. Openness to experiment

initiated under Lenin now beginning to close down under Josef Stalin.

Historical

- 1928 Stalin introduced the First Five-Year Plan whose chief aim was to rapidly expand industrial production to bring a vast country into line with Western Europe.

Political

- Vertov associated with the Revolutionary LEF group (Left Front) whose members included Rodchenko, Mayakovsky and Eisenstein. In 1928 the first All-Union Party Congress on Film Questions criticised 'formalist devices' as used by Eisenstein and others. These were considered to make films inaccessible to a mass audience.

Technological

- Vertov had worked on the agit-trains, mobile propaganda centres sent to the Eastern front and the far corners of the Soviet Union. Their task was to disseminate propaganda through films, plays, leaflets and posters. To do this they both projected films (giving many audiences their first experience of cinema) and recorded images and events, which they edited together to form newsreels and documentaries as the train was speeding across the USSR. They worked on the move.

Institutional

- Early 1922 Lenin established a fixed ratio between entertainment and documentary film 'The Lenin Proportion'. This was 75% fiction films to 25% documentary films. By 1925 cinema was a vital public institution. Production was rising. Policies of distribution and exhibition ensured that even remote areas had cinemas.

FILM MOVEMENTS: Constructivism and Modernism - STARTING POINTS

- The artistic revolution that had begun in Europe in the early years of the century had spread to Russia before 1917. Young artists attacked traditional art forms and absorbed European modernist movements such as Cubism and Futurism with their interest in abstract forms. Constructivism was the new art form of the Revolution. Art also had to free itself from its bourgeois past; new ideas and experimentation were taking place in all the arts. Easel painting was linked to bourgeois decadence. There needed to be new forms.

- After 1917, Russian artists such as Kasimir Malevitch and Vladimir Tatlin formulated the theories of Constructivism using a combination of technology, science and art. The emphasis was not on the reproduction of reality but 'making' and 'building' from pieces or fragments and analysing 'reality'. Rodchenko used photo-montage, in which fragments were given new meanings. The artist, a technician first and foremost, used his or her labour to produce a work of art as a social product that served the needs of the proletariat, no longer divorced from everyday life but part of the revolutionary struggle. Theatre was bourgeois; film was the art form of tomorrow. Cinema became synonymous with progress in its combination of both art and technology.
- Vertov was a Constructivist, for him montage was part of the selection process. The combination of shots would affect the audience, making them aware. He founded the experimental group *Kino eye* together with his wife Elisaveta Svilova (co-editor) and his brother Mikhail Kaufman (cameraman). They felt the task of the Soviet film was to document reality 'to reveal truth' and were opposed to the fiction film that depended on artifice '*the ordinary fiction film acts like a cigar or cigarette on a smoker. Intoxicated by the cine-nicotine, the spectator sucks from the screen the substance which soothes his nerves... distorting his protesting consciousness in every possible way*'.