

San Francisco International Film Festival—Part 4

Dziga Vertov's *The Man with a Movie Camera*: One of the films you must see!

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This is the fourth and final in a series of articles on the recent San Francisco International Film Festival, held April 5-19. The first part was posted April 26, the second on April 29 and the third on May 4.

A highlight of the recent San Francisco film festival was the screening of Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov's masterpiece, *The Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), at the historic Castro Theatre, built in 1922.

Vertov's documentary, or, in his own words, "experiment work," attempts in a relentlessly energetic fashion to sum up life in several Soviet cities (Kharkov, Kiev, Odessa and Moscow) in the late 1920s. Factories, streets, trains, buses, autos; miners, textile workers, steelworkers, street cleaners, peasants; birth, death, marriage and divorce—almost every human activity, occupation or aspect of life you can think of is in Vertov's film, all in the space of 68 minutes!

A live band, DeVotchKa, accompanied the film at the Castro, as was the custom during its showings in the silent era. The group, based in Denver, is known for its ability to play a variety of genres. The band members, all excellent and versatile musicians, made great efforts to create music that corresponded with or commented on the imagery, heightening the overall experience. The auditorium was packed, and the crowd gave the film and the musicians a standing ovation at the conclusion.

Vertov (1896-1954) is a fascinating, important figure. Books could be and have been written about him. Here we only want to introduce readers of the WSWs to an artist with whom many will not be familiar.

Born David Abelevich Kaufman (also known as Denis Kaufman), Vertov—according to Annette Michelson in the introduction to a volume of Vertov's writings—was "the son of Jewish intellectuals of Bialystok, then Russian territory [now Poland]."

(Fascinatingly, his younger brother, Boris, became a renowned cinematographer, going on to shoot the films of legendary French filmmaker Jean Vigo and, in the US, works by Elia Kazan—including *On the Waterfront*—and Sidney Lumet in particular—*12 Angry Men*, *The Pawnbroker*, etc. Another brother, Mikhail, a cinematographer and photographer, is the very "Man with a Movie Camera" in Vertov's film of that title.)

After his family fled the German army to Moscow during World War I, Vertov (whose adopted name loosely translates from Ukrainian as "spinning top") fell in with futurist and other artistic circles. Having already studied music at the conservatory in Bialystok, Vertov took on medical studies in St. Petersburg.

In 1918 he joined the Film Committee of the People's Commissariat

of Public Education in Moscow, becoming editor/director of the first newsreel programs produced by the Soviet government, *Kino-Nedelya* (*Film-Week*). Many of these newsreels are available on YouTube, including No. 22, where Leon Trotsky is prominent. At this time, Vertov met his future wife and lifelong collaborator, Elizaveta Svilova (1900-75). She appears as a film editor, which she was, in *The Man with a Movie Camera*.

Vertov worked as a correspondent during the Civil War, touring battlefronts along with Mikhail Kalinin, the titular head of the Soviet state, on the propaganda train, "The October Revolution." Vertov directed a series of newsreels, released as *Kino-Pravda* (*Film-Truth*, 1922-25), and several feature documentaries, *Kino-Glaz* (*Film-Eye*, 1924), *Stride, Soviet!* (1926), *A Sixth Part of the World* (1926) and *The Eleventh Year* (1928), before making *The Man with a Movie Camera*. All of these works (although not all the episodes of *Kino-Nedelya* and *Kino-Pravda*) are accessible online.

It is also worth noting that Aleksandr Rodchenko, the brilliant Soviet constructivist artist and photographer, collaborated with Vertov on the intertitles for several episodes of *Kino-Pravda*. Rodchenko is known to have designed nos. 7, 13 and 14, but his presence seems more pervasive. The influence of Rodchenko's photographic style on Vertov seems obvious at times, in the choice of certain angles and vantage-points, although it's possible the influence worked the other way, or that there was an artistic meeting of minds. (Rodchenko's work on *Kino-Pravda* No. 13, which again centrally features Trotsky, is interesting. Around this time, Rodchenko also proposed a cover design for Trotsky's *Problems of Everyday Life*.)

Enthusiasm: Symphony of the Donbass (1930), Vertov's first sound film, which orchestrates natural, human and industrial sounds, is another remarkable achievement. About it, Charlie Chaplin commented, "I would never have believed it possible to assemble mechanical noises to create such beauty. One of the most superb symphonies I have known. Dziga Vertov is a musician."

Vertov's final major work, *Three Songs of Lenin* (1934), which commemorates the tenth anniversary of the Russian revolutionary's death through a compilation of documentary and archival material, is overly worshipful (Lenin would have cringed!) and already reveals the massive damage inflicted by Stalinism on Soviet art.

Michelson writes: "From this time until his death, Vertov worked under circumstances, described in his journal, which were the inexorable result of the growing constraints and contradictions of the Soviet film industry during the massive bureaucratization of the Stalinist regime. The last decade of his life was therefore one of

increasingly intermittent assignments, and these were principally the making of newsreels. He died in Moscow in 1954.”

This diary entry from 1939 perhaps sums up the situation: “I make one proposal after another. While the studio proposes nothing. It’s as if I’m on stage, while the management and the script department are in the auditorium. I run my legs off, proposing one thing, then another. And the audience watches and listens. And remains silent. And I feel as if I’m way at the bottom. Facing the first step of a long steep staircase.”

As for the fate of *The Man with a Movie Camera*, Michelson explains that the film “was simply unavailable for concentrated study within the Soviet Union, and until 1970 it was equally unavailable, for all practical, critical purposes, in the West.” Now, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the general attack on the legitimacy of the October Revolution, Vertov has once again sunk into undeserved obscurity.

Vertov’s theories

Dziga Vertov is famed for his strident opposition to “film drama,” to romance and artifice, to the influence of “foreign matter ... music, literature, and theater” in cinema. We seek, he wrote, “our own rhythm, one lifted from nowhere else, and we find it in the movements of things.” His slogan was “Life as it is!”

He argued that the camera, a piece of machinery, could solve artistic and social problems because it could “see” and probe deeper than the naked human eye. He wrote: “The main and essential thing is: The sensory exploration of the world through film. We therefore take as the point of departure the use of the camera as a kino-eye [film-eye], more perfect than the human eye, for the exploration of the chaos of visual phenomena that fills space. The kino-eye lives and moves in time and space; it gathers and records impressions in a manner wholly different from that of the human eye.”

There is no reason to follow Vertov on all of these theoretical excursions, including the “leftist” ones, which were very much products of the times, a revolutionary epoch with its harshness, vast potential and gigantic demands, on the one hand, and the political-theoretical immaturity of the artists themselves, on the other. And, by the end of the 1920s, the growth of the Stalinist bureaucracy sharply distorted artistic life. Schools and trends were set one against the other, each obliged to seek favor and backing from the increasingly manipulative and cynical cultural apparatus, and theoretical positions often became accordingly one-sided, fixed and “doctrinaire.” Vertov castigated fellow filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, the latter denounced Vertov, numerous Soviet critics condemned *The Man with a Movie Camera*, etc., etc.

In fact, Vertov, Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin, Alexander Dovzhenko, Lev Kuleshov, Boris Barnet and other Soviet filmmakers demonstrated in practice that life could be approached in any number of ways. As Leon Trotsky pointed out, no “little artistic factory” had a monopoly on “socialist” or “revolutionary” art and truth. Films as diverse as Vertov’s various nonfiction efforts, Eisenstein’s *Strike* and *Battleship Potemkin*, Pudovkin’s *The End of St. Petersburg*, Kuleshov’s *The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks*, Barnet’s *The Girl with a Hatbox* and Yakov Protazanov’s *Aelita: Queen of Mars* are all legitimate (and intriguing)

responses to post-revolutionary life and conditions.

Had Trotsky, Aleksandr Voronsky and other genuine Marxists still been able to intervene by 1928 or 1930, and not faced repression and exile instead, the atmosphere would have been *entirely* different.

In any event, what are the strongest impressions that *The Man with a Movie Camera* makes on a contemporary viewer?

First, the pace of the movie is fascinating and seductive. Vertov and associates were in love with speed, machinery, cities, motion, progress and everything that embodies those qualities: airplanes, sports, cars, conveyor belts, radio, electricity and so forth.

Trotsky, even while recognizing the defects and utopianism of the Soviet “left” artistic milieu, praised the trend as a whole because it “is against mysticism, against the passive deification of nature, against the aristocratic and every other kind of laziness, against dreaminess, and against lachrymosity—and stands for technique, for scientific organization, for the machine, for planfulness, for will power, for courage, for speed, for precision, and for the new man, who is armed with all these things.” This is Vertov to a T.

Second, there is the film’s inventiveness and hopefulness, its belief in human capability, which it proves in practice, sending “the man with a movie camera” up bridges, over trestles, into moving cars, into beer glasses, under trains and elsewhere.

Let us leave the final word on his film to Vertov:

“Streets and streetcars intersect. And buildings and buses. Legs and smiling faces. Hands and mouths. Shoulders and eyes. ...

“A whirlpool of contacts, blows, embraces, games, accidents, athletics, dances, taxes, sights, thefts, incoming and outgoing papers set off against all sorts of seething human labor.

“How is the ordinary, naked eye to make sense of this visual chaos of fleeting life?

“A little man, armed with a movie camera, leaves the little fake world of the film-factory and heads for life. Life tosses him to and fro like a straw. He’s like a frail canoe on a stormy sea. He’s continually swamped by the furious city traffic. The rushing, hurrying human crowd surges ‘round him at every turn. ...

“The man with the camera must give up his usual immobility. He must exert his powers of observation, quickness, and agility to the utmost in order to keep pace with life’s fleeting phenomena. ...

“Life’s chaos gradually becomes clear as he observes and shoots. Nothing is accidental. Everything is explicable and governed by law.”

Concluded



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