



SIGHT AND SOUND GREATEST FILMS OF ALL TIME 2022: 9=

Man with a Movie Camera (Chelovek s kinoapparatom)

‘Down with bourgeois fairytale plots and scenarios – long live life as it is!’ So said Dziga Vertov, for whom documentary was the only true revolutionary form as it freed film from false scenarios and performing actors. *Man with a Movie Camera*, about life in a Soviet city from dawn to dusk, was certainly revolutionary in its approach to image creation, which continually undermines and extends itself to dazzling and witty effect. As well as Vertov, the Kino-Eye Council of Three – which attempted to engender a new kind of perception through cinematic montage – comprised Vertov’s editor wife, Elizaveta Svilova, and his camera operator brother, Mikhail Kaufman. All three deserve authorship credit for the film.

Helen DeWitt, *Sight and Sound*, Winter 2022-23

David Abelevich Kaufman is documentary’s Jumpin’ Jack Flash. Indeed, there is a photograph of him caught in mid-air, jumping. His pseudonym ‘Dziga Vertov’, which translates as ‘spinning top’, could not be more apposite. And his masterpiece, *Man with a Movie Camera* (*Chelovek s kinoapparatom*) is a flash spinning-top of a movie. It has taken more than 80 years, though, for this to be fully recognised.

Man with a Movie Camera is a ‘city symphony’ film of a kind not uncommon in the 1920s. These films celebrated the vibrancy of the modern cityscape with pastiches of urban images, for the most part neither set up nor reconstructed. Vertov, though, plays fast and loose with the conventions of such films, to profound effect. He superimposes, splits the screen, deploys fast- and slow-motion and extreme close-ups, and animates using stop-motion. Most surprisingly, he shows us the processes whereby a documentary is made. The eponymous man with the movie camera is his brother Mikhail, and his wife, Yelizaveta Svilova, is his editor. Both appear at work on screen.

His experimental exuberance was not appreciated. When the film was seen in the West, it was dismissed. The British documentarist Paul Rotha remembered: ‘Vertov we regarded really as rather a joke, you know. All this cutting, and one camera photographing another camera photographing another camera – it was all trickery, and we didn’t take it seriously.’ At the time, his colleague John Grierson, the Scottish producer and theorist regarded as the father of British realist documentary, dismissed Vertov’s work peremptorily: ‘Vertov has pushed the argument to a point at which it becomes ridiculous.’ More profoundly and more dangerously for Vertov, he was also attacked in the Soviet Union. Eisenstein called *Man with a Movie Camera* ‘cine-hooliganism’. The comrade-theoreticians associated with the intellectual *LEF* journal were equally unimpressed: ‘Dziga Vertov cuts up newsreel. In this sense his work is not artistically progressive’ – a failing that could get you years in the Gulag.

Vertov, who always marched to a different drummer, compounded the threat. He never produced recognisable scripts, shot from the hip (most of the time), went over budget and was generally uncontrollable. He was a combative polemicist vehemently insisting that the potential of the cinema as a

revolutionary tool was being ignored by his fellows. Their fictions were bourgeois distractions, unlike his efforts with the ‘unplayed film’, as he called documentary.

Almost from the start of his career in newsreels immediately after the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, and in total contrast to the fixed-camera procedures of the time, he was already experimenting with special effects to reveal, through the *kino-glaz*, the camera’s eye, film truth – *kino-pravda*. ‘Film is not merely... facts recorded on film... but the product, a “higher mathematics” of facts.’ Crucially, he disdained everyday observationalism: ‘Our eyes,’ he wrote, ‘see very poorly and very little... the movie camera was invented to penetrate more deeply into the visible world.’

And the world as he saw it in *Man with a Movie Camera* was not revolutionary enough. The film is not really about filming the filming. That might be its most startling element, but he thought it a subordinate theme. Rather, it is a critique of Lenin’s temporising with the middle class with his New Economic Policy, introduced in the wake of the post-revolution civil war. Vertov shows us beggars and porters and the bourgeoisie parading themselves in horse-drawn carriages. In his view, none of this should have still been around. The Bolshoi Theatre, for Vertov an unacceptable relic of the old regime, is made optically to collapse on itself. Such a criticism, though, was to Party-eyes ‘left-infantilism’, as bad as – or worse than – his formalist un-‘progressive’ experimentations.

Nevertheless, the controversy over the film did not finish his career. Unrepentant as the decade turned, he embraced synchronous sound with his flamboyance undiminished. But as stifling Stalinism took hold, he became an ever-more marginal figure. Reduced to editing newsreels, he was to die of undiagnosed cancer in 1954, aged 58. The filmmaker Marina Goldovskaya remembers him sitting in the courtyard of the apartment block in Moscow where she grew up, always looking ‘very sad’.

And then the French translated the *LEF* debates, and in 1960 the anthropologist Jean Rouch decided, like Vertov, to include footage of himself and his co-director Edgar Morin when making *Chronicle of a Summer* (*Chronique d’un été*), a film-ethnography on the ‘strange tribe that lived in Paris’. Rouch made his debt to Vertov explicit: he was after, he announced on screen at the outset of his film, ‘*un espèce d’un cinéma vérité*’, a type of cinema truth – *kino-pravda*. The reappraisal of Vertov’s work was underway.

Rouch, like Vertov, was concerned with exploiting the camera eye to reveal deeper truths and, as with Vertov, filming the filmmakers was only part of the attempt to go beyond surface realities. In his films, Rouch not only talked to the people he filmed but also had them re-enact events – whether actual or fantasy – as a way of getting further inside their heads. The line from, say, current controversies over re-enactments and fantasies in Joshua Oppenheimer’s *The Act of Killing*, clearly runs back via Rouch to Vertov’s *kino-glaz*.

Today, all such possibilities matter more and more. A ‘kino-eye’ seeing beneath surface realities offers a crucial lifeline as modern technology undercuts and wounds mainstream realist documentary’s essential observationalist assumptions, perhaps fatally. Vertov’s agenda in *Man with a Movie Camera* signposts nothing less than how documentary can survive the digital destruction of photographic image integrity and yet still, as Vertov wanted, ‘show us life’. Vertov is, in fact, the key to documentary’s future. It is

no wonder that in 2012 *Man with a Movie Camera* entered the top ten in *Sight & Sound*’s ‘Greatest films of all time’ list and that now it tops the poll for the greatest documentary ever made. It is not merely that a great film now receives its just desserts. Vertov has no reason any longer to be ‘sad’.

Brian Winston, *Sight & Sound*, September 2014

MAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA (CHELOVEK S KINOAPPARATOM)

‘Author/Supervisor of the Experiment’: Dziga Vertov
Production Company: VUFKU
Chief Cameraman: Mikhail Kaufman
Assistant Editor: Elizaveta Svivlova

USSR 1928
68 mins

With live piano accompaniment by Cyrus Gabrysch on Saturday 4 March.

SIGHT AND SOUND GREATEST FILMS OF ALL TIME 2022

Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles
Wed 1 Mar 18:00; Thu 2 Mar 18:50; Sat 11 Mar 18:50
Daisies (Sedmikrásky) + Meshes of the Afternoon
Wed 1 Mar 20:50; Wed 8 Mar 18:20 (+ intro)
Au hasard Balthazar
Thu 2 Mar 20:50; Mon 6 Mar 18:30
Taxi Driver
Thu 2 Mar 21:00 BFI IMAX; Fri 3 Mar 18:10; Mon 13 Mar 20:40
La Règle du jeu (The Rules of the Game)
Fri 3 Mar 14:30; Sat 4 Mar 13:20; Sat 11 Mar 18:05
Persona
Fri 3 Mar 18:30; Thu 9 Mar 21:05
Portrait of a Lady on Fire (Portrait de la jeune fille en feu)
Fri 3 Mar 20:30; Wed 8 Mar 20:30
Do the Right Thing
Fri 3 Mar 20:35; Sat 11 Mar 18:10
Singin’ in the Rain
Fri 3 Mar 20:40; Thu 9 Mar 18:10 (+ intro by Miles Eady, Film Writer and Curator); Tue 14 Mar 14:30
Man With a Movie Camera (Chelovek s kino-apparatom)
Sat 4 Mar 15:30; Sun 5 Mar 10:30 BFI IMAX; Thu 9 Mar 20:50
Playtime
Sat 4 Mar 17:00; Sat 11 Mar 20:30
The Searchers
Sat 4 Mar 17:40; Tue 7 Mar 20:35
Seven Samurai (Shichinin no samurai)
Sat 4 Mar 18:50; Tue 14 Mar 18:40
Apocalypse Now: Final Cut
Sat 4 Mar 19:40; Sun 12 Mar 20:00 BFI IMAX

Tokyo Story (Tôkyô monogatari)
Sat 4 Mar 20:15; Fri 10 Mar 18:00; Wed 15 Mar 14:30
Shoah
Sun 5 Mar 11:00; Sun 12 Mar 11:00
Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans
Sun 5 Mar 11:45; Mon 6 Mar 14:00; Mon 13 Mar 20:35
The Passion of Joan of Arc (La passion de Jeanne d’Arc)
Sun 5 Mar 14:00 (with live accompaniment); Wed 15 Mar 20:40 (with score)
Citizen Kane
Sun 5 Mar 16:15; Tue 7 Mar 20:30
Cléo from 5 to 7 (Cléo de 5 à 7)
Sun 5 Mar 17:45; Wed 8 Mar 21:00
2001: A Space Odyssey
Sun 5 Mar 19:00; Thu 9 Mar 18:00
Vertigo
Mon 6 Mar 20:30; Thu 9 Mar 14:30; Wed 15 Mar 18:10
In the Mood for Love (Fa yeung nin wah)
Mon 6 Mar 20:40; Fri 10 Mar 21:00; Sun 12 Mar 18:30
Late Spring (Banshun)
Mon 6 Mar 20:45; Tue 7 Mar 14:30; Sun 12 Mar 18:20
The Night of the Hunter
Tue 7 Mar 18:00; Sat 11 Mar 20:45
Mulholland Dr.
Tue 7 Mar 20:10; Tue 14 Mar 20:15
Beau Travail
Wed 8 Mar 14:30; Fri 10 Mar 20:45; Mon 13 Mar 18:20 (+ intro by Catherine Wheatley, Reader in Film Studies, King’s College London)
Close-Up (Nema-ye Nazdik)
Fri 10 Mar 18:30; Wed 15 Mar 20:50
The Godfather
Fri 10 Mar 19:00; Sun 12 Mar 18:15

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