



Man with a movie camera

Director: Dziga Vertov
Country: USSR
Date: 1929

A dialogue between Ben Livant and Dan Jardine at

<http://djardine.blogspot.co.uk/2010/01/man-with-movie-camera-1928-russia.html>

Ben Livant: The film itself is remarkable for being socialist realism and avant-garde at the same time. Mind you - and contrary to ideologically convenient historical ignorance about the Soviet Union - in 1929 the two had yet to be dogmatically divided. Less than an ongoing meta-statement about itself so prevalent in high modernist art, MWAMC seems to me to be a Brechtian distancing effect. This is generally associated with a humorless tone put to the service of a radical critique of something bourgeois. But MWAMC is just the opposite. It is an upbeat affair that almost has the feeling of a promotional tourist document.

And "document" is the right word, because the film is not propagandist cultural advertising. It is a documentary that just happens to also document how it made itself and sometimes even how it was received by an audience as it was being made, (at least I think that is portrayed).

There's no accounting for all the wild and wacky techniques employed in the film except to conclude that the film-maker was enraptured with all the latest options and didn't want to neglect a single one. Part of the tremendous creativity of the film has to do with this cornucopia of gimmicks. But they transcend mere gimmickry by being presented as just some of the wonderful mechanical achievements of the society as a whole. The man with the movie camera in MWAMC is part of the great industrial division of labour that includes all the other spinning tops and groovy hardware. Again, the artist is not presenting himself outside of his art or anything else. He is rather in the thick of it, documenting his work along side that of his peers in all their diverse vocational and recreational settings.

The absence of nature in the film is revealing. Any sort of uncultivated landscape is not in the program. Even rural areas are not present and animals are minimally shown. It's full-steam ahead with optimistic sidewalks and the goodness of engines. Looking at MWAMC in 2009, I felt like Chuck Heston in the Omega Man watching Woodstock. It's hard to fathom now how the film takes progress for granted and is absolutely confident that it is contributing to The Great Society, (to borrow the title of the domestic policy initiative of Lyndon Johnson).

Having recently seen the downer that is Koyaanisqatsi, I can attest to it being pretty much the antithesis of MWAMC and for me a much lesser artistic achievement. It's not just that I'm an old commie. It's that KOY becomes increasingly didactic and intelligence-insulting whereas MWAMC never abandons its bordering-on-surrealist playfulness to preach on a soapbox. Hey, I also liked the music that I'm guessing Swinscoe composed for the 1929 film a lot better than the piece Glass wrote for the 1982 film - so there.

Dan Jardine: In the delightfully inventive Man With a Movie Camera, Dziga Vertov is obviously far more interested in the formalist aspects of filmmaking than he is in towing the ideological line (something that would get him in all sorts of trouble soon after this film's release). The film is, as you note, a very upbeat affair, not at all the sort of tone we normally associate with the supposedly dour Russians. There is some attempt to be responsible to the party line in that the film does show us real people doing real work in the real world of Odessa and Moscow. And this is a near-pristine depiction of such life, as there doesn't seem to be too much grit under the fingernails of all these hard working folks.

And Vertov clearly sees himself as one of those folks, as the film has a wonderful meta-quality to it, showing us the filmmaking hard at work setting up and executing his shots, just like the people and machinery he so lovingly photographs for our entertainment. His lengthy array of elaborate, intricate and otherwise dazzling cinematic techniques are a wonder to behold, infusing the film with a real joyous sense of discovery, the same sort of exuberance he is trying to capture in his shots of people in their work environs. As you say, the film is pure optimism, as there is nary a discouraging word (metaphorical or otherwise) to be found in MWAMC; this is the Soviet Union on the move, progress being placed at the service of the people.

There is also a constant sense of motion, as Vertov really hauls his ass around the cityscapes in search of the next cool shot. The film's energy is a key aspect of its optimism, a dawn to dusk challenge to show us a day in the life of a Soviet urban dweller, as we race through the streets towards a brave new socialist future, Vertov is doing his damndest to keep up and share it with us. Vertov's obvious pleasure at the things he can do with a camera are also intended to mirror the workers enthusiasm for their various endeavours, and usher in a sparkly mechanically-driven future. Further, the scope of the film may appear somewhat limited (a day in the life of a futuristic Soviet city), Vertov has his eyes on something a little grander as well. In juxtaposed sequences, he shows a couple registering to marry, and another about to divorce, then childbirth (with a bird's eye view of the event at that) followed by a funeral. Vertov is trying to capture a lifetime in a day.

Vertov declared that it was his goal to make films so engaging and exciting out of the real world that it would lead to the elimination of all non-documentary filmmaking. While he may have come up a few yards short of that goal (and really, what was he thinking?) that's not to fault him for trying. Man With a Movie Camera is a dizzying, dazzling piece of filmmaking.

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