



Man with a Movie Camera Discussion Guide

Director: Dziga Vertov

Year: 1929

Time: 67 min

You might know this director from:

Kino-Pravda (1922-1925)

Kino Eye (1924)

One-Sixth of the World (1926)

The Eleventh Year (1928)

Enthusiasm (1930)

Lullaby (1937)

FILM SUMMARY

While other film directors of the time were pushing the envelope on how to tell the most artistically creative, romantically tinged story, Dziga Vertov was hell-bent on relaying the truth on screen. **MAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA**, released in 1929 after having been filmed over a period of three years in urban U.S.S.R., was Vertov's attempt at stripping the staged set and getting down to the nit and grit of real life.

Fascinated with machinery, the technicalities of the world and the possibilities the camera itself offered to capture this world Vertov, his wife Elizaveta and brother Mikhail established the Council of Three, publishing manifestoes railing against the what they believed to be the manipulative tendencies of cinematographers. They called for truth in cinema. No costumes, no make-up. The world as the stage and the actors everyday people. **MAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA** is their documentary of unfiltered, unmanipulated, unadjusted reality.

Depicting a summer's day in the Soviet Union as it embraced its relatively new political and social regime, primarily unstaged scenarios flood the film screen. An audience enters a cinema. The camera watches the audience watching the film as the film presents itself to the audience. Out on the streets of communist Russia, life motors onwards. With sometimes dizzying effect, the film cuts between a woman working, a man filming, and a woman editing the film that is being watched. The camera, the eye, sees all and communicates that all.

A silent film accompanied by a soundtrack described in finite detail by Vertov, **MAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA** is a fascinating study of the mechanisms of life and the world at large. By doing away with the confines of language and the contrivings of the make-believe, this film serves as an internationally accessible testimony to moving imagery, placing Vertov in the history books as one of documentary films' defining figures.

FILM THEMES

Dziga Vertov has been credited as the father of documentary film, opting for fact over fiction in the field of cinematography, capturing reality and the world that otherwise escapes our ever-distracted eyes.

THE CAMERA AS EYE

Although there is still no widely accepted definition of documentary film, Vertov's concept - to present "life as it is" and "life caught unawares" - has long been considered a benchmark in the field. With his Kino-pravda, or cinematic truth, Vertov took a technical approach to filmmaking, strongly believing in the camera's mechanical ability to capture the world more clearly than the human eye, thus enabling film audiences to witness the world and their place within it with an unparalleled clarity. Devoid of re-enactments, vacant of stagings, Vertov's documentarian approach vilified the romanticizing of film, the manner in which directors distanced themselves from the real world beneath the guise of art, theatricalizing life, contorting it, helping people to escape rather than embrace. What he offered - his breed of documentary filmmaking - presented viewers with the opportunity to reflect back on their own humanity, to witness how they are a part of a greater whole, all spinning, rotating, revolving in the giant wheel of life. At a time when cinema was embracing the contrived, Vertov adopted the socialist realism of his nation's politics and transferred them onto film. By using the camera as a mechanical eye, he captured for all eternity just what it was he saw.

A CYCLE OF SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

Vertov was a scientist at heart, fascinated with machinery, with the interworkings and technicalities of the world at large. Filmically speaking, he presented varying scenarios one after the other, offering the viewer an opportunity to reflect on the similarities between the individual and the larger world, between people working, the wind blowing, and a machine's functioning. Cycles and patterns surround us, and depending on the angle from which they are viewed, the human, natural, and manufactured worlds are impossible to separate. Through his "moving" imagery, encapsulating the mechanisms of transportation (trams rushing past one another, carriages bounding down the road, a bicycle fixed in place in a shop window), we revisit the movement within us, the shifting weather patterns, the cycles of life. Anyone alive in the real world can relate to Vertov's everyday imagery. While offering the likenesses, Vertov simultaneously opposed objects, settings, and circumstances to offer up the intrinsic differences incorporating existence. A couple getting married, one getting divorced, the camera never moving an inch. A child being born, an old man dying. The monotony of a gear revolving, the chaos of a crowded street. People in rest on park benches, people in the blur of sports activity. As if Vertov was saying, "Water washes a woman's face, washes a city street. People live, people die. The world is a mechanism. Witness the patterns." Confusion and clarity meet face to face. We, the onlooker, the audience in the cinema seat, are a part of the film. As we see the photographer, perched atop bridges, lugging his camera onto the summery beach, he sees us. He captures us. He documents our comings and goings and feeds it unfiltered back to us.

“This film presents an experiment in the cinematic communication of visible events without the aid of intertitles, without the aid of scenario, without the aid of theater. This experimental work aims at creating a truly international absolute language of cinema based on its total separation from the language of theater and literature.”

Film prologue

FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. What did you know about MAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA before watching it? Were your expectations met?
2. Did any of the film images appear to be distinctly Russian? Without knowing the film was made in the U.S.S.R., would you have been able to place the setting?
3. Were any of the film scenes shocking or surprising, overriding your preconceptions of 1920s' Soviet Union?
4. In which ways does MAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA function as a Soviet propaganda film?
5. Which musical soundtrack accompanied the version you saw? How much power over the viewing experience does the music have, especially in silent films?
6. What do you think Vertov was trying to say by filming the camera operator?
7. Do you agree with MAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA's appointment as one of the first great documentary films?
8. Were you engaged throughout the film? Were there any parts of the film that seemed superfluous, or any that seemed underdeveloped?
9. At one point in the film, we are presented with still images and then shown the moving reel from which they were taken. Did you find the still or moving images to be more powerful?
10. What do you think Vertov's intended message is opening and closing the film with shots of an audience in a cinema?

NOTES:

FILM FACTS:

- Director Dziga Vertov was born David Abelevich Kaufman in 1896 in Poland, which was then a part of the Russian Empire. As his family was Jewish, they fled from the German Army to Moscow in 1915. He studied music and medicine before working as a film editor. In 1922, he started the Kino-Pravda (“film truth”) film newsreel, where he filmed everyday experiences and presented them in 20-minute segments. Vertov had a keen interest in machinery, which greatly influenced his filmmaking – his cinematographical visions included transporting film away from its romantic tendencies and basing it more on the rhythm of machines.
- Film editor and director Elizaveta Svilova, Vertov’s wife, is featured in *MAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA* as the film editor.
- Vertov had two younger brothers – Boris and Mikhail Kaufman – who both worked as cinematographers. Boris lived in France and the U.S., where he won an Academy Award and Golden Globe. Mikhail worked with Dziga for years, and was the director of photography in *MAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA*, where he is filmed walking around with a camera. The two fell out after this film and never worked together again.
- Dziga Vertov loosely translates as “spinning top.”
- The Council of Three – Dziga, Elizaveta, and Mikhail – issued manifestoes on film, declaring a “death sentence” on previous cinema.
- The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics or Soviet Union, where Vertov spent the majority of his working life, existed between 1922 and 1991. Governed as a single-party state with its capital in Moscow, it included the present-day countries of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Estonia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan. Following Lenin’s death in 1924, Stalin came to power, initiating a centrally planned economy that led to rapid industrialization. Vertov was a supporter of Communism, and is known as the father of Soviet documentary, openly opposing theater, fiction, and staged events in film.
- Vertov’s theory of Kino-Pravda is said to have inspired *cinéma vérité*, a style of documentary filmmaking established in 1950s’ France.
- *MAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA*, intended to depict life over a 24-hour period, was shot in the Soviet cities of Kiev, Kharkov, Moscow, and Odessa.
- Vertov wrote extensive musical instructions for the film. Various versions of the film are available, each containing different musical scores. The version viewed for this guide features a score by the Alloy Orchestra.
- BFI’s polled over 300 leading critics, curators and filmmakers to create a list of the greatest documentaries of all time – *Man with a Movie Camera* topped that list at #1.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Share** this film. Give other the chance to enjoy this classic documentary.
2. **Read** “The Man with the Movie Camera: The Film Companion” by Graham Roberts, which offers a look at the production as well as the film’s place in Russian and world cinema.
3. **Make** your own documentary film! [Cinereach](#) offers plenty of helpful tips on funding and getting started and PBS’s site [POV: For Filmmakers](#) provides a wide range of resources for filmmakers.
4. **Dare** to trust your instinct in your art. Like Dziga Vertov did when he broke through preconceived notions of filmmaking.

We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.