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Experimental Modernism in City Symphony Films

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The film medium that provides spectators with new experiences through the reproduction of parallel realities in different temporalities was a revolutionary invention. Cinema not only fascinated early 20th century's viewers by enlarging their world perception through showing thousands of new places inaccessible for most people, cinema was also fertile ground for early modernists' experimentation. Modernist artists saw the film medium as the most vivid form to represent space and its new conception that animated the artistic debate especially in Europe during the first decades of the 20th century. The modern space was linked to time and motion in a fundamental way relative to the position of the individual observer. In the same way, the cognitive interpretation developed by the incipient psychology provided alternative ways to approach the relationship between the exterior world and the individual. These trends developed by avant-garde artists were contextualized in a changing world, portrayed by the city space and the metropolis, which from the second half of the 19th century had experienced the most significant change in a short time span. A metropolis offered a new scale, unable to be perceived through unique sense of coherence and unity.

Avant-garde literary movements that emerged in the first decades of the 20th century, including representative works such as John Dos Passos' novel *Manhattan Transfer*, portrayed the metropolis as an intense, fragmented, multilayered and complex space, where multiple stories and characters formed a sort of collage. The metropolis, which was a theme of public discussion during the early 20th century within disciplines, such as sociology and urban planning, was also a motif of visual exploration developed

by avant-garde artists, who aimed to depict the sense of dynamism, speed, and simultaneity so central to the “machine age.”

This essay suggests that the films *Manhatta* (United States, 1921); *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (Germany, 1927); and *The Man with the Movie Camera* (Soviet Union, 1929) commonly classified as “City Symphony films,” crystallize three notions explored by early modernist artists: the new metropolis, the relationship between time, space and motion, and the new cognitive interpretation of the world.

The concept of simultaneity was the way that Cubist and Futurist artists gave sequential and temporal expression to static two-dimensional figures. The manifesto of the Italian Futurist Movement declared in 1909 the predilection for machines, velocity and movement in the visual arts, and adopted from the Cubists the decomposition of reality through planes. On the other hand, the emerging psychology, which stimulated subjectivity on perception, opened new artistic explorations based not on passive reproduction of reality, but in active transformation of the artist’s own reflections into new forms of expression. From this context, city symphony films, although use documentary images of cities, non-professional performers, and portray non-fictional sequences, cannot be easily classified within the documentary genre; city symphony films portray the city as a fascinating machine, represented many times by abstract compositions in the way that kinetic artists represented motion and technology. In these films, the metropolitan life appears as a fragmented reality, depicted through diverse angles, like a cubist painting. City symphony films illustrate the dynamic forces of urban life from an experimental and artistic approach. Even the three silent films share many stylistic features, such as (1) the use of the metropolis as the main character versus

individual personalities, (2) a temporal structure that portrays a day-life of the city, starting at the morning and ending at night, and (3) the use of a rhythmic montage accompanied by music, each film depicts specific cultural and ideological approaches to the city.

Exploring the New Medium

The filmmakers of the three symphonies were primarily experimental and avant-garde artists: Walther Ruttmann, the German director of *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*, studied architecture in Zurich in 1906, but switched to painting and music in 1909, moving to Munich where he became close to avant-garde artists like Paul Klee, Karl Feininger and Lovis Corinth, among others.¹ His film career began in the early 1920s with abstract short films, such as *Opus I* and *Opus II* (1921) that functioned as experiments of kinetic art, using painting to create moving abstract forms synchronized with music. In *Berlin*, Ruttmann aimed to explore formal and aesthetic principles using the dynamic city as the main protagonist. As he wrote, “during the long years of my development through abstractionism, I never lost the desire to build from living materials and to create a film symphony out of the myriad moving energies of a great city.”²

Dziga Vertov, the director of *The Man with the Movie Camera*, first studied medicine in St. Petersburg between 1916-17, and while pursuing his studies, began to explore verbal montage structures through experiments with sound recording and assemblage.³ His earlier filmic exploration started in 1918, when the young Vertov became the editor of the first newsreel produced by the Soviet government. A few years later, his “Kinopravda” series, short films as a mode of reportage on wide variety of topics developed for the newspaper the Pravda founded by Lenin, were the laboratory for

his filmic experiments.⁴ Vertov's definition of cinema emphasizes the vocation of films to capture the feel of the world using the camera as a more perfect eye than the human eye. His techniques of montage aimed to create a visual linkage between phenomena separated in time and intended to organize fragmented images through a rhythmic visual order.

The creators of *Manhatta*, the American photographers Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand, were also artists. Paul Strand started exploring photography and painting during the 1910s, while Charles Sheeler studied industrial art in Philadelphia, traveling to Europe between 1904 and 1909. In 1912, Sheeler began his explorations in photography, showing an interest in architectural themes, especially the iconic skyscraper, which illustrated simplified cubist compositions through its geometrical forms.

Framing and Editing the Real World

Following the silent films' tradition, *Manhatta* is structured through the alternation of titles and film sequences, mostly composed by the succession of fixed panoramic shots. These aesthetically composed images illustrate Sheeler and Strand's previous experience in photography and serve to validate the beauty of skyscrapers as an expression of modernity and progress. Sheeler and Strand emphasize the new scale of the city and the impressive height of skyscrapers through original shots, such as people walking in front of a façade where the scale of the building's windows miniaturize people; or a high-angle camera with a foreground composed by a solid balustrade that suggests at the distance, a street full of cars, moving like ants.

Berlin, Symphony of a Great City and *The Man of the Movie Camera* do not include titles; in *Berlin*, Ruttmann aimed that every scene spoke by itself,⁵ while Vertov,

who believed that “Cine-Eye” would influence man’s evolution and considered drama as another opiate for the masses, included titles only at the opening of the film: *The Man with the Movie Camera*... presents an experiment in the cinematic communication” in order to create a “...truly international language of cinema based on its total separation from the language of theatre and literature”.⁶

Manhatta’s titles are not employed to articulate a traditional narrative structure; the three films use the metropolis as the main character over the prevalence of individual personalities and specific stories to create a complete new perception of the city. The emergent film medium was able to reproduce the simultaneous, dynamic and complex stimulus produced by density rather than capturing a supposedly fixed reality. To create this new perception, editing would be the instrument to construct the metropolitan collage.

When Vsevolod Pudovkin wrote about ‘filmic time’ and ‘filmic space,’ he noted that the laws of real space and time condition each shot, but editing creates a different dimension of filmic space-time.⁷ The filmic space, which is freely created by the director through the conjunction of separate shots, is able to create a new space into the filmic space.

The editing of *Manhatta*, far from the rapid montage developed by Vertov and Ruttmann, creates a filmic space that allows enough time. Spectators understand that first sequences of crowd disembarking from a ferry portray the start of a common workday. In these sequences, the moving crowd never portrayed through close-angle-camera, is set as another aesthetic element, on the same level as buildings, locomotives and cranes. At the end of the film, a sunset at the ocean shows that the day is ending; however, this is the

only shot that portrays the world of nature. In *Manhatta*, *Berlin* and *The Man with Movie Camera*, moving human bodies, not only seem to find in the built environment their natural landscape; they also seem to be part of an assemblage system so necessary for the mechanized era.

Manhatta does not include associative editing in the way of Vertov and Ruttmann; however, the systematic inclusion of smokestacks with dancing vapors that move on the screen, suggest how Sheeler and Strand explore the potential of the film medium to represent movement. Their approach also suggests that the built world, the world of the metropolis with its activity in the harbor, the dense crowd moving, the vapors, cranes, and iron pieces of construction dancing in the highest plane, have a poetic and aesthetic value. In the same way that naturalistic painters display nature as a source of infinite inspiration and beauty, these modernist artists display Manhattan and its modern image as a new iconic symbol of beauty, able to crystallize the pulse of the new era.

Gilles Deleuze points out that in Vertov's film, buildings, machines, human and cinema itself all appear on the same plane. This plane is not composed in the manner of Sergei Eisenstein, who used a dialectical montage to link the organic connection between the individual and his world, but through dialectic in matter by which "the whole merges with the infinite set of matter, and the interval merges with an eye in matter."⁸ Vertov believed that cinema was one piece within the larger Soviet project, which aimed to construct a new society for the "new man." This new society, founded on the aspirations of the revolutionary proletariat, must improve the intellectual existence of society as a whole, replacing the nature of artistic activity by production, equalling art with labour.

For Vertov, films not only represented the process of industrialization; the film director was the engineer who guided the thoughts and associations of the spectator.

In *Berlin*, editing serves to portray the metropolis as a collage in motion. The use of associative editing with social content, such as laborers' legs walking on streets, followed by legs of cows going to the slaughterhouse, or mechanical toys on store windows followed by real people going to their jobs, do not represent a dominant discourse within the film. Ruttmann's insistence to portray industrial production, and to celebrate the beauty of machines, motion and activity, even through domestic images, such as the opening of shutters and blinds, suggests how the German director uses documentary images of the metropolis as a canvas to compose his artwork rather than an instrument of social reform. The close-angle camera of rippling water at the opening of the film, which turns into moving lines of light and shadow through visual transition, creates an abstract composition that turns again into train barriers, and later, into a train approaching at high speed. The next sequence, made by a rapid montage of railroad tracks, pylons, and mechanical parts of a moving locomotive, serves to illustrate Ruttmann's fascination for machines and motion. Even the natural landscape seen from the train windows is transformed by the effect of speed into sophisticated images, closer to avant-garde works of abstraction and kinetic art. In *Berlin*, the scanned surfaces of buildings and avenues, as multilayered, fractioned spaces, inhabited by diverse and anonymous people, represent the modern perception of urban space. The simultaneous fractions of space-time can never sum up the complexity in a single view.

In *The Man with the Movie Camera*, the experimental approach is evident from the opening: the image of a cameraman standing over a film camera, followed by a

theater where the seats are folded up and later occupied by the audience ready to see a film, are examples of Vertov preparing the viewers to experience a very different type of movie. The beginning of the day is portrayed through the privacy of bedrooms with occupants deeply sleeping; these sequences are interspersed by shots of poor people sleeping on sidewalks and on public park benches. A rapid montage of empty streets, closed stores and closed windows represent the time before people begin to awaken. Panoramic images of the city are combined with close-angle camera shots showing store windows with inactive mechanical toys. The city slowly begins to wake up and starts a productive day through the movement of both human bodies and machines. The systematic inclusion of moving mechanisms followed by moving people indicates Vertov's celebration of machine. As he points out in his 1922's manifesto: "By revealing the souls of machines, by making the worker love his lathe, the peasant his tractor, the driver his engine, we bring creative joy to all mechanical labor, we bring men closer to machines, we train the new man."⁹

Documentary Images of the City

Manhattan in United States, Berlin in Germany, and Moscow, Odessa and Kiev in Soviet Union, are represented through realistic documentary images. These films are also non-fictional movies, and the people who appear on screen are not professional actors; however, we find it difficult to categorize city symphony films as documentaries, not in the dominant mode we now classify documentaries, with people speaking in front of a camera, and with real locations to expose everyday life. As Bill Nichols points out, early cinema lacked the taxonomic divisions we now think natural.¹⁰ Documentary movements that emerged in the early 1930s with figures such as Lorentz, Grierson and Rotha, who

combined the representation of everyday-real-world and political discourses, saw the film medium as a powerful form to educate people and promote social reform. From this approach, Sheeler and Strand's *Manhatta* seems to be more an experiment that uses the new media as a form of artistic language and avant-garde exploration of motion rather than a medium to denounce social problems within the industrialized society. On the contrary, *Manhatta* celebrates the progress of American society through its skyscrapers, bridges, and dense activity. In the same way, even though Ruttmann includes sequences that could be interpreted as complaints to the mechanized society, in *Berlin*, the German director seems to use metropolitan motifs for formal explorations in the same way he used abstract painted forms to experiment with kinetic art.

Vertov's film seems to portray a global image of Soviet cities rather than the depiction of a specific place, in order to promote a new society. In *The Man with the Movie Camera*, Moscow, Odessa, and Kiev are never explicitly distinguished.¹¹ Even though Vertov's city is portrayed through cars, trams, belching smokestacks and crowds moving across streets, the main difference with Ruttmann's *Berlin* and *Manhatta* is the use of the film medium not only to experiment its potential for representing motion, and to display the intense, multilayered and complex space of the metropolis; Vertov also uses the film medium to create a political discourse. In *The Man with the Movie Camera*, manual activities realized by individuals and represented by close-up shots of smiling faces and active hands, are systematically interspersed with images of machines in motion. This relationship between man and machine suggests not only the celebration of productive activity as the only way to build the new society, but also that the new society could be constructed only through a mechanized era. As Vertov declared in his

manifesto: “In the face of the machine we are ashamed of man’s instability to control him, but what are we to do if we find the unerring ways of electricity more exciting than the disorderly haste of active people and the demoralizing inertia of the passive.”¹²

City Symphony films are rare films developed during a short period. They crystallize the fresh approach of avant-garde artists, who saw the film medium as a fertile ground to experiment with image in motion. The filmic space and filmic time we perceive in these films are not mere reproductions of reality; they are explorations and subjective perceptions of a changing world that is illustrated through the metropolis. The three films are also expressions of the personal and artistic reflection of each filmmaker. Early modernists of the 1920s, before the consolidation of cinema as a commercial industry, developed innovative techniques that later the taxonomic system would classify as experimental films; however during that time, cinema was synonymous with experimentation, and cinema was synonymous with avant-garde modernism.

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