4. MAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA: trainspotting!

‘Man with a Movie Camera’ (1929)

‘Long live the poetry of the propelling and propelled machine, the poetry of levers, wheels, and steel wings, the iron screech of movements, the dazzling grimaces of red-hot jets.’


‘...images of trains as symbols of connectedness (especially in combination with bridges) and of dynamism, rupture with the past, glorification of modernity, continue through the 1920s in the Futurist avant garde...while the image eventually disappears from Italian art, it is absorbed, maintained, and continuously re-elaborated in Soviet art, where it becomes part of the official iconology...’

Mikhail Kaufman, the cinematographer and eponymous Man of the film, had a serious disagreement with his brother, Dziga Vertov, the director, over the editing of ‘Man with a Movie Camera’ (they never worked together again). In a later interview he complained about the ‘interminable number of trams’ in the film and indeed they are everywhere, not surprising when filming in European cities. As with many of the Kinoks’ films there are also a lot of trains featured, particularly at the beginning and end. Both are used to create dynamism, criss-crossing the screen, often at dramatic angles, and acting as a counterpoint to previous and following scenes. Train sequences also signpost a journey to Odesa intercut with views of the station and passengers in cabs. This post also shows that many of the particular railway themes in ‘Man with a Movie Camera’ are a re-use or continuation of those in previous Kinoks’ films throughout the 1920s.

The railway had a significant role at the beginning of Dziga Vertov’s career when, from January 1920, he was enlisted to work on the administration of film shooting and exhibitions on the famous Agit(ational) trains (Агит-поезд, Agit-poyezda) that spread propaganda and education throughout the areas occupied by the Red Army during the Civil War. He travelled and organised film shows on the ‘Red October’ Agit-train at this time:

‘The next step was my work on the agit-trains of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee. Comrade Lenin attached great significance to the use of film in the work of the agitational trains and steamers. And so on January 6, 1920, I leave with Comrade Kalinin for the southeast front. I take films with me, including “The Anniversary of the Revolution”...We screen that film at all the train stops and carry it to urban movie theatres. At the same time, we shoot. The result is a film about the journey of the all-Russian senior leader, Kalinin. The period of my work concludes with the big film “A History of the Civil War”.'
Contemporary poster showing film projection on to an outdoor screen

Trotsky’s train from ‘The Anniversary of the Revolution’ (1918)
‘The October Revolution – a Bridge to a Brighter Future’ (1921 poster)

1 A Russian term referring to the sides of a locomotive cab (e.g., the driver stands/sits on or behind the right wing), not airplane wings (made of fabric or aluminium in that era).


3 Киноки (Киноки) was the name of the collective of Soviet documentary filmmakers founded in 1922 by Vertov, Elizaveta Svilova (Vertov’s wife) and Kaufman (the word comes from an amalgamation of the Russian for ‘Film Eyes’, ‘кино-оки’/кино-оки).

4 [00:20:57] [00:21:00] [00:21:38] [00:21:51] [00:22:00] [00:22:11]
Screenshot times [hr:min:sec] from a restored version of the film (see Notes).

5 For extensive details of Vertov’s involvement in these trains refer to ‘Dziga Vertov, Life and Work: Volume 1’, John MacKay, Academic Studies Press, 2018 (Ch. 4 p. 233 on).


Mikhail Kalinin (1875-1946) was the Chairman of the Central Executive Committee of the All-Russian Congress of Soviets.

‘The Anniversary of the Revolution’ (1918) was Vertov’s first full length film, a two-hour long documentary using archival footage, some taken from the ‘Film-Week’ (Kino-Nedelia) newsreel series (recently restored, see Notes).

‘History of the Civil War’ (1921) was another long compilation documentary film (again, using some material from the ‘Film-Week’ series). Most of the film is considered lost.
TRAINS IN ‘MAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA’

The first dramatic appearance of a train in the film as it rushes towards the intrepid cameraman. There’s an even braver one filming this in the middle of the track!

[00:10:07]

An impression is given that the camera was placed in a hole between the tracks for the shot (compare with the actual location above!).

[00:10:29]
The ‘nightmare’ and ‘waking woman’ sequence of carriages rushing across the screen at different angles.
An extraordinary sequence ending with footage of a railway track interrupted with black, darkened, and repeated frames to achieve a flickering stroboscopic effect. Professor Vlada Petrić, in his detailed analysis of the film[^7], has a fascinating explanation of this sequence as intending to represent ‘hypnopompic’ sensations (the transitional state that occurs during waking up).

A previous shot of a railway track from Dziga Vertov’s ‘A Sixth Part of the World’ (1926).

A well-known photograph of Mikhail Kaufman on a Soviet-made EP (aka GET) series electric locomotive (built in 1926-27) with a Debrie Parvo Model JK camera in another risky position. The location of the camera was presumably to film railway tracks like the shots seen above (or perhaps this is just a pose...). An interesting photograph not least because the electrification of the railways in the Soviet Union, promoted by Lenin, only started in 1926 with the 19km Baku – Sabunchi – Surakhani railway in the Azerbaijan SSR. Kaufman featured this unusual (and short) locomotive in his city symphony ‘Moscow’ (1927) so presumably this photograph was taken in 1926 (though the loco is looking rather battered for such a recent introduction!).
However, electrification of Moscow’s railway system did not begin until 1929 so the sequence was either filmed in Azerbaijan (by Kaufman or others?) or perhaps it was running on Moscow tram lines (both the tram and railway gauges in Russia are 5 ft\(^8\)). A rather quaint photograph to modern eyes but in 1920s Soviet Russia the loco and camera epitomised modern technology, a theme in so much of the Kinoks’ work.

\(^8\)The 5 ft railway gauge was proposed by an American engineer hired as a consultant to the Moscow-St Petersburg Railway in the 1840s, George Washington Whistler, the father of the renowned artist James Abbott McNeill Whistler.

The intertitle describes the EP as ‘The first Soviet electric locomotive’.
Screenshot of the EP electric locomotive from ‘Moscow’.

The train goes over the camera in a typical Kinoks’ under-train shot.
Balancing on top of the carriage for this shot was a very precarious location for the cameraman but Mikhail Kaufman ‘...used to push himself to his limits, often risking his life. While working on the episodes of ‘Kino-Pravda’ (Dziga Vertov’s documentary series 1922-1925) Kaufman used to lay on the rails with the camera and film the train rushing forward above him. Once, the [carriage] was not properly attached and Kaufman escaped death by moving aside at the last moment...Another time [while filming for ‘Man with a Movie Camera’] he worked standing on top of a train.’ ['Mikhail Kaufman, Ukrainian Dilogy’, Stanislav Bytiutskyi, Oleksandr Dovzhenko National Centre, Kyiv, 2018, p. 15]. Kaufman also shot an almost identical sequence for his earlier film ‘Moscow’ (1927) below.

Many of the familiar scenes in ‘Man with a Movie Camera’ are also evident in Kaufman’s film such as the tram and train sequences, shots of the Bolshoi Theatre, Mostorg department store, Theatre and Revolution Squares, Kuznetsky Most street, Strastnaya Square and Novo-Sukharevsky Market in Moscow, steelworks scenes, machinery and workers, buses emerging from a depot, high level filming of traffic and crowd scenes. Bearing in mind the scarcity and expense of film stock at the time it would seem logical that some of this footage would be used for MwaMC. This recycling was common in most of the Kinoks’ work, some of the same sequences appearing in several films.
From ‘Moscow’ above, and similar rooftop sequences from ‘Kino-Pravda’ below, the first one facing to the rear of the train.

‘Kino-Pravda’ No.19 (1924) [Austrian Film Museum]

‘Kino-Pravda’ No.19 [Austrian Film Museum]
On the locomotive steps with the Debrie Parvo Model L camera. Mikhail Kaufman lives up to his dare-devil reputation with another dangerous camera position (circled) taking close-up footage of the engine wheels (below). Filmed (probably with a hand-held camera) from the platform beside the boiler (arrow) – you can see the locomotive number on the side of the cab. There is some footage filmed from a similar location in ‘Kino-Pravda’ No. 20.
‘...the poetry of levers, wheels, and steel wings, the iron screech of movements...’
This low-level filming of locomotive wheels also featured in Vertov’s 1926 film ‘A Sixth Part of the World’, above (how was the second shot filmed from this angle?).

A shot of wheels from the carriage steps this time from ‘Kino-Pravda’ No. 20 [Austrian Film Museum]
More close-up footage of locomotive wheels in motion from ‘Kino-Pravda’ and Mikhail Kaufman’s ‘Moscow’ (part of a sequence of trains and locomotives).

‘Kino-Pravda’ No.20 [Austrian Film Museum]

‘Moscow’ (1927)
At the first [00:10:07] filming location from the other side of the tracks (note the electricity posts seen in [00:10:07]).

[00:20:57]

The camera follows the train as it passes (note the triangulated posts in the distance seen in [00:10:07]).

[00:20:59] [01:07:36]
At the second location – the train stops. This scene is repeated several times.

It seems dangerous and foolhardy if, as the passage above suggests, Mikhail Kaufman was indeed lying on the tracks to film these multiple sequences. How did he try it out the first time not knowing how much clearance there was under different trains – look at the low steel bar in the screenshot? The passage above suggests that he was nearly killed filming the sequences below from ‘Kino-Pravda’ from what sounds like a loose part of the carriage coupling hanging down. The commentary below seems apt! After this I suspect that the clockwork Kinamo camera was used for most of these shots (see my blog post on the cameras used in the film, link below).

‘At one point a curious intertitle informs us: “4 metres of movie-camera memory, as it falls under the wheels of the freight train.” The huge wheels flash by; a view from under the train. That’s it. The last 4 metres of what the movie camera remembers. Evidently, in the eyes of the kinocs their kino-eye was a living being.’

Screenshot from Austrian Film Museum print of ‘Kino-Pravda’ No. 19

Just the locomotive this time from ‘Kino-Pravda’ No.20 [Austrian Film Museum]
Under-train shots were a feature of Kinoks’ films from the beginning – below is a scene from ‘Kino-glaz’ (1924). This superbly filmed sequence is quite hypnotic and very different in character to the more conventional shots in ‘Man with a Movie Camera’. Note the heavy coupling hanging down, presumably like the one that nearly killed Kaufman!

The same piece of film was re-used for the end of Kino-Pravda No. 21 (devoted to Lenin). The text says ‘along the rails of Leninism’.

‘Kino-Pravda’ No. 21 (1925) [Austrian Film Museum]
Viktor Shklovsky in his review of ‘Stride, Soviet!’ in Sovetski Ecran (14th August 1926, p. 4)\textsuperscript{11} praises ‘the shots of a train beneath the wheels’. It isn’t clear what this is referring to as I haven’t found any under train shots in this film. However, there are other superb shots of locomotives which I have added at the end of the post.


There is a horse and cart version (going backwards over the camera) in ‘Kino-glaz’. Surely filmed with a motorised camera, not hand-cranking!

At the first filming location (note the triangulated posts). Filmed in the opposite direction to [00:10:07].
Taken from similar camera positions at the second location but different locomotives. Imagine lying between the tracks, if this was the case, watching this train approaching!

A similar locomotive and track shot but at a third location.
A similar shot from ‘Kino-Pravda’, a locomotive only – see above for the underneath view.

‘Kino-Pravda’ No.20 [Austrian Film Museum]

A shot of a locomotive without carriages going away at the second location (very little clearance underneath – another heavy coupling hanging down!).

[01:06:56]
Another steam engine ‘at speed’ along the track at the first filmed location (presumed from the post in the distance).

A similar shot from the track-side in ‘Kino-glaz’ (1924)
The C (S) on the front of the steam engines in the films gives a clue to the type. This is a restored example of the Class C (2-6-2 wheel configuration), a common passenger locomotive of this era, built in Russia between 1910 and 1919. Wikipedia Russia has a very comprehensive article about these good-looking locomotives, including details of the individual ones seen in the film. [photo source: Wikipedia Russia]

The carriage behind the locomotive is typical of many in the film, a Third Class Pre-Revolutionary design, built in the 1900s, usually painted green.

[Photograph courtesy of fototerra.ru]
Another Class C undergoing maintenance work, and a finished one emerging from the shed freshly painted with a star on the front, both in Vertov’s ‘Stride, Soviet!’ (1926). See the end of the post for more shots of locomotives in this film.
A great shot of an unnumbered Class C locomotive coming into a station from ‘Kino-Pravda’.

‘Kino-Pravda’ No. 22 (1925) [Austrian Film Museum]
The only non Class C locomotive in ‘Man with a Movie Camera’ at the second filming location. It is likely to be a Class Щ (2-8-0) type (as in the superb group photograph on the following page) from the unclear letter on the front, which was in service in Ukraine (built 1906-1924).
Perhaps influenced by Arthur Honneger’s 1923 orchestral work ‘Pacific 231’ an example of this class of locomotive inspired a vocal composition in 1926 [music by V. Kruchinin, lyrics by P. Herman], and a rather good Constructivist poster!
A mysterious vehicle on the railway track, front (top) and rear (bottom). These are ‘hidden’ images in the last fast montage of the film, only occupying a few frames. I have not found any contemporary or earlier truck, van, ‘bus, or car that looks remotely like this vehicle. It seems to have a heavily framed ‘V’ shaped windscreen and superstructure, a (red?) star on top of the radiator and a (wooden?) buffer bar fitted to the front and rear of it. The rear (presumed) is almost semi-circular with large lights and a small window. No rear loading doors, so perhaps a passenger vehicle.
It could be a conversion of the ubiquitous AMO F-15 truck, though the radiator looks different and there are only single wheels at the back (the truck has paired rear wheels). This odd contraption does not appear anywhere else in the film and the track location seems to be different from the others. Shot for an earlier film (one of the lost episodes of ‘Kino-Pravda’?) perhaps, though I haven’t found anything yet.

The cameraman being run over again, and this convinces me that a clockwork camera (such as the Kinamo) and not the hand-cranked Debrie Parvo or Interview\(^\text{12}\) must have been used for most of these ‘under train’ shots as there is no possibility of this chassis clearing someone lying on the track!

The wheels are very odd as they appear to have rubber tyres (look at the rear ones), and are not flanged steel railway wheels, an impossibility! There are examples of rubber-tyred rail vehicles but they always have some method of keeping the wheels on the rails.

\(^{12}\)See my blog post on the cameras in the film for details, link below.
A car on rails also featured in the newsreel ‘Cinema Week’ (Kino-Nedelya) but this one is more obviously adapted for rail use with proper flanged wheels (and it makes a lot of smoke!)\(^{13}\).

\(^{13}\)Dziga Vertov began his film career as the office manager and book keeper of the Moscow Film Committee’s Photo-Film Division that produced Kino-Nedelya and he started editing the films around the time of this issue [refer to ‘Dziga Vertov, Life and Work: Volume 1’, John MacKay, Academic Studies Press, 2018, Ch. 4 p. 193 on].

Other shots of trains in the film not illustrated above: [00:10:14] [00:10:18] [00:21:01] [00:21:14] [01:03:48] [01:04:47] [01:04:48] [01:04:51] [01:06:08] [01:07:34].

A shot of Mikhail Kaufman with the Debrie Parvo camera apparently during filming of ‘Man with a Movie Camera’ [source: ‘Mikhail Kaufman, Ukrainian Dilogy’, Stanislav Bytiutskyi, Oleksandr Dovzhenko National Centre, Kyiv, 2018]. The tracks are for a narrow gauge railway (2’6”), half of the conventional track gauge in Russia. Most of these railways were in forested areas or for the peat industry, or in factory locations. It isn’t clear where this was taken. The stacked timber might be a clue. These railway tracks do not appear in the film.
‘STRIDE, SOVIET!’ [Шагай Совет!] (1926)

No connection to any footage seen in ‘Man with a Movie Camera’ but I thought I would add some more shots of steam locomotives from this earlier Kinoks’ film. As with so much of their carefully composed cinematography the individual frames make wonderful still pictures (the cameraman on this film was Ivan Beliakov).
A Class C locomotive smoke box being cleaned out.

Dramatic footage of crashed trains, perhaps in the Civil War as you can see some artillery in the wrecked wagons.
A locomotive appears to have collided with the rear of a military train!

A locomotive on its side.
POSTSCRIPT

Nearly twenty years after writing the words at the beginning of this post Dziga Vertov looked back on his career in 1941 using a railway analogy:

“Documentary cinema is not yet a cross-country vehicle. These are still the first rails and the first locomotive. I’ve spent my whole life building the locomotive, but I have not yet been able to obtain a broad railway network...”


NOTES

I have added links to other websites and information to enhance the value of this post and although I have taken reasonable steps to ensure that they are reputable, I am unable to accept responsibility for any viruses and malware arising from these links.

This post assumes some knowledge of this 1929 masterpiece of Soviet Cinema and its creators. For more information and a bibliography of essential reading about the film read my previous blog posts:

MAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA: the movie cameras

MAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA: the film locations

MAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA: the first cinema screening
Fair Use claimed for any copyright material as it is copied solely for research purposes and commentary only, without financial gain. Attribution and links given where known. Contemporary Soviet photographs are generally in the public domain.

‘Man with a Movie Camera’ screenshots from various sources. Screenshot times (approximate) in [hr:min:sec] from the Eye Institute/Lobster Films 2014 restoration of the film.

Screenshots of ‘Stride, Soviet!’ from a YouTube version posted by Film Preservation Associates.

‘Anniversary of the Revolution’ (1918), Russian State Documentary Film and Photo Archive, restored by Nikolai Izvolov, 2018.

Screenshots of ‘Moscow’ (1927) from a YouTube video posted by the CSDF Museum project.

Many thanks to Lewis Siegelbaum, Professor Emeritus of History at Michigan State University, for information regarding the ‘mystery vehicle’ at the end of the film.

Locomotive information from various sources including Wikipedia.

Other references on the association of railways and the avant-garde:

‘Putting Revolution in the Rails’, Tevfik Rada, Academia, 2019


Please contact me with any comments and queries: richardbossonsfcisd@gmail.com

ALL ORIGINAL CONTENT COPYRIGHT © Richard Bossons 2020

END.