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Philip Cavendish: The Men with the Movie Camera. The Poetics of Visual Style in Soviet Avant-Garde Cinema of the 1920s.

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Keywords: Eduard Tisse; Sergei Eizenshtein; Anatolii Golovnia; Vsevolod Pudovkin; Andrei Moskvina; Leonid Trauberg; Grigorii Kozintsev; Danilo Demuts'kii; Oleksandr Dovzhenko; Aleksandr Granovskii; Mikhail Kaufman; avant-garde; cinematography; cameraman



In the context of scholarly work which looks at the Soviet avant-garde cinema of the 1920s primarily through the lens of montage theory and the works of directors such as Lev Kuleshov, Sergei Eizenshtein, Vsevolod Pudovkin and Dziga Vertov, Cavendish's monograph is a breath of fresh air. In his own words, Cavendish focuses on camerawork, i.e. "the poetics of composition and lighting techniques [...] [A] neglected aspect of cinema studies, and yet [...] fundamental to the visual resonance of the filmic image" (2013: 1). Moreover, it is through the analysis of visual poetics that Cavendish sets out to reposition the Soviet cinematographers of the 1920s as co-authors of avant-garde productions on par with the aforementioned directors.

Before dedicating a chapter to each of the four cameraman/director pairs who regularly cooperated in the 1920s (and often beyond), Cavendish uses his first chapter to present us with preliminary evidence in support of his thesis: the standard practice of making camera-operator's scenarios which specify composition and lighting arrangement as distinguished from the practice of producing director's scenarios which specify shot lists; the consistency of visual style across cinematographers' films directed by different directors; contemporary film press which credits cameramen with much artistic creativity; contemporary film-theoretical writings which assigns greater weight to camera techniques than to montage; cameramen's greater experience in film production relative to their counterparts'; and the notable differences in the directors' scene drawings and shot end-results.

Having convincingly argued for the re-evaluation of the status of cameramen from the perspective of the 1920s Soviet film production and reception, in the following four chapters Cavendish focuses on the details of visual style in the works of Eduard Tisse and Eizenshtein, Anatolii Golovnia and Pudovkin, Andrei Moskvin and Leonid Trauberg, and Grigorii Kozintsev and Danilo Demutsk'ii and Oleksandr Dovzhenko, respectively. The detailed analysis of the key facets of typical cinematographic avant-garde techniques – "extreme close-ups, trun-

cation, *décadrage*, diagonal constructions, extreme angles of vision, *contre-jour* and 'washing'" (ibid.: 188) – in these authors' films is particularly impressive. Across these chapters great attention is also paid to portraiture as well as to influences that Impressionism and Pictorialism exerted among Soviet cameramen, particularly in their use of soft focus. The monograph concludes with a brief account of how the new pressures of the 1930s – the introduction of talkies, the embrace of a "cinema understood by the millions", the criticism of "formalism", and the failure of the profession to secure formal authorship rights – put an end to innovative camerawork in the Soviet Union.

Cavendish's monograph is a painstakingly researched piece of film scholarship which excels in film history as much as in formal analysis. Concerning the former, Cavendish marshals a plethora of pertinent documents – contemporary press, theory, production materials, letters, diaries, etc. – to make his case. Regarding the latter, Cavendish analyses a number of classics as well as lesser known Soviet avant-garde masterpieces with such attention to detail that he is, for instance, regularly able to give an account of the lightning arrangement on the basis of the images alone. Particularly commendable is Cavendish's restraint in terms of making broader interpretative claims. Cavendish chooses to focus on the immediate experiential and dramatic effects of the visual style rather than performing a socio-historical and cultural exegesis of these images. Instead of, for example, trying to extrapolate Dovzhenko's philosophy and views on Ukrainian nation on the basis of the images in his and Demutsk'yi's films, Cavendish opts to give as convincing an account as possible in terms of how it is to see these images.

Cavendish's detailed formal analysis, however, is at the same time responsible for the monograph's greatest omission – the relative dearth of illustrations. On most of the occasions we have only Cavendish's description to fall back on and one feels as though he is being taught geometry without any aid of chalk and blackboard. This is particularly

cumbersome in the cases of films which are less known and, in turn, far less available than the classics. A good case in point is a film for which Tisse served as the cinematographer – *Evreiskoe schast'e / Jewish Luck* (Aleksandr Granovskii, 1925, Soviet Union). Given that the discussion of this film is used as the key evidence in favour of the view that Tisse developed his camerawork independently of Eisenstein, it is rather disappointing that not a single still which could immediately corroborate Cavendish's descriptions is reproduced. From the perspective of studio production, similarly, it would have helped to see a (part of a) camera operator's scenario. Unfortunately, not a single excerpt from a single scenario can be found in the monograph. Arguably, an analysis of such a passage next to a corresponding excerpt from the director's scenario would have made the overall argument even stronger.

Although, as I mentioned earlier, Cavendish is to be applauded for generally not venturing into broader interpretative territory in which adjudicating between competing claims is almost impossible to accomplish, he does on occasion exhibit overbearing certainty when speaking of effects of and intentions behind the use of particular techniques. A case in point is the discussion of the "primitive" axial staging with rare use of close-ups in the Varangian episode in *Zvenihora / Zvenigora* (Dovzhenko, 1928, Soviet Union):

Those, like Sobolev, who regard the *longueurs* of this sequence as the product of Zavelev's conservative instincts, and note their retrograde character when compared to montage theory in its Soviet manifestation, are missing the point entirely. The unvarying position of the camera and the stylized attitudes of the actors are clearly designed to allude to antiquated forms of artistic expression (ibid.: 263).

It is certainly possible that Dovzhenko used these "primitive" camera set-ups and staging techniques in an effort to represent a mythological subject by means of "ancient" film techniques further accentuating the distinctiveness of mythical times from

modern ones. But to dismiss the opposite view espoused by Sobolev without citing any evidence from documents such as production notes or Dovzhenko's own comments and to do so with such confidence is unwarranted.

It would have also been fruitful to have a chapter on another famous cameraman/director collaboration – Mikhail Kaufman and his brother Vertov – especially given the almost exclusive focus in the scholarship on the latter. Perhaps this could have also been a place for Cavendish to give a more precise account of his understanding of documentary style. In the chapter on Golovnia in Pudovkin where the notion of documentary plays an important role and especially in the discussion of *Mekhanika golovnoga mozga / Mechanics of the Brain* (Pudovkin, 1926, Soviet Union), Cavendish, interestingly, suggests that staging and camerawork alone can transform documentary into fiction. More on this idea and how it relates to claims that style alone cannot determine the fictional/documentary status espoused by theorists such as Noël Carroll (1997) would have been helpful.

Notwithstanding some of my more critical remarks, Cavendish's monograph remains a scholarly work to be reckoned with – an exhaustive formal analysis of a neglected but key aspect of cinema, sensible in its interpretative claims, and supported by rich contextual information.

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