

Adjusted Soundtracks and *The Man with The Movie Camera*

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Dziga Vertov is a brilliant filmmaker. He created some of the most influential Soviet films of all time, including the 1929 film *The Man with the Movie Camera* (sometimes referred to as *The Man with a Movie Camera*). Vertov was interested in experimental film, and as such, *The Man with the Movie Camera* incorporates experimental film techniques. Most of these techniques, now commonplace in films today, have been discussed thoroughly in scholarly film literature. However, there is one technique that has had little discussion: That is the use of an “adjusted soundtrack” for films. Adjusted soundtrack, as defined in this essay, is when a film maker decides that their film should be screened not with a soundtrack made explicitly for the film, but instead with “music of the times.”¹ This essay will discuss how through the use of an adjusted soundtrack, we can better understand Vertov’s true vision for the film and how this term can be used to describe other films.

Vertov’s Experiments with Film

Vertov is widely known for his prowess in filmmaking, and for good reason: Vertov wanted to create a “fresh perspective of the world” in his films.² The most popular example of this is his use of the term “kino eye”. Kino Eye, or mechanical eye, was his vision for how he made films that would showcase what only the medium of film could do. He felt film was locked into the tradition of stage plays, and it was time to discover a new style that was specifically cinematic.³ Indeed he did accomplish this feat, as he would gain clout in the film-

1. Remes, Justin. “The City Symphony.” Lecture, Experimental Film from Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa, September 10, 2018.

2. Roberts, Graham. 2000. *The Man with the Movie Camera*. I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd: 20.

3. Ebert, Roger. “The Great Movies: Man with a Movie Camera.” www.rogerebert.com (July 1, 2009): 1.

making community for reinvigorating the medium in a time that was already experiencing radical experimentation.⁴

However, Dziga Vertov's experiments were not limited to the kino eye, as he was also interested in music. As a child, Vertov studied music⁵ but his interest in experimental soundtracks would not be fully recognized until his 1931 film *Enthusiasm*. *Enthusiasm* would showcase "distinct non-synchronization" with the visual images. He wanted to promote the idea of a "visual montage" with a soundtrack that was more subtly edited in order to achieve new effects.⁶ And while Vertov's experiments with the soundtrack were clearly recognized in *Enthusiasm*, there is evidence of other experiments happening before this instance.

The Musical Scenario

For the first screening of *The Man with the Movie Camera*, Dziga Vertov handwrote pages of notes detailing the ideas of what the live orchestra was supposed to play during the film. Copies of these notes were sent to theatres⁷ that were screening the film so that the experience of watching the 66-minute film would not be met with silence.

But how were multiple theatres supposed to replicate Vertov's notes exactly and give the audience the best experience possible? It would be the case that no matter the interpretation, "[e]ach time *Man with a Movie Camera* is shown, it is made anew."⁸ None of the

4. Eberts, *The Great Movies: Man with a Movie Camera*, 1

5. Fischer, Lucy. "Enthusiasm: From Kino-Eye to Radio-Eye." *Film Quarterly* (ARCHIVE), no. 31 (Winter 1977-78): 25.

6. Fischer, "Enthusiasm: From Kino-Eye to Radio-Eye," 26.

7. Tsivian, Yuri. "La "Musica Congelata" Di Vertov." *Griffithiana*, no. 54 (1995): 95.

8. Tsivian, Yuri. "Man with a Movie Camera, Reel One." *Film Studies* no. 2 (2000): 55.

screenings would have the definitive experience, and that was ultimately Vertov's vision for the film. According to Roberts, the film was "an experiment in visual music, a visual concert."⁹ Vertov wanted the audience to focus on the theoretical manifestation of images on the screen. The music would simply fade into the background as the audience watched the images dance on the screen. In order for this to happen, the soundtrack would need to be appropriate for each showing of the film. In this way, the vagueness of the musical scenario allows the conductor at each of the screenings around the world to "adjust" the soundtrack so that it would be the most receptive to their particular audience. The adjusted soundtrack lets Vertov's *The Man with the Movie Camera* be relevant during its first screening and any and all future screenings. Each time the film would be shown, the soundtrack would change so that even 80 years after the film was produced, it would still be fresh. This arbitrariness in the audio cleverly makes connections to people long after Vertov had passed away. In the following paragraphs, I will discuss how the adjusted soundtrack borrows similar ideas from other concepts.

Audio-Visual Counterpoint

Audio-visual counterpoint is the term for when two or more sources of information clash with each other in order to create new meaning.¹⁰ In movies, this refers to the music being played in relation to the images being shown. For example, putting happy music over a murder scene would make the audience notice the discrepancy and feel uncomfortable at the

9. Roberts, *The Man with the Movie Camera*, 33.

10. Lachance, Noémie and Zander, Jana. "Counterpoint in Film Music: An Audiovisual Essay." Vimeo video, 12:48, posted by "Film and Media Studies Groningen", May 12, 2014. 00:50.

contrast. Audio-visual counterpoint serves as a filmic tool that movie producers can use to “play with audio and visuals deliberately in order to create effects using this stark contrast.”¹¹

Vertov does something similar in *the Man with the Movie Camera*. However, instead of this contrast being deliberate, it is apparent regardless of the music used during the screening of the film. If the film is accompanied by one of the many orchestral interpretations of the movie’s music scenarios, then the classical music might seem out of place for a movie focused on the mundane. If the film is accompanied by a modern electronic soundtrack, then the music might feel odd being set in a timeframe where electronic music would not have or could not have been produced. These clashes occur no matter what soundtrack is used during the film and was something Vertov had considered when declaring that his film would be show with music of the times. But this fluidity of not being beholden to one set soundtrack allows the person(s) screening the film to make creative decisions that will let their audience enjoy the film more. Indeed, this is the effect that Vertov wanted when audiences view his film. As Tsivian writes, “...Victor Shklovsky called the twenties 'the second Baroque.' Even though he cited only the names of Vladimir Mayakovsky and Sergei Eisenstein and their devotion to 'difficult' form and 'intense detail', we may safely add that *Man with a Movie Camera*, with its fluid boundary between 'inside' and 'outside', its 'trompe-l'oeil' music, and its interest in the process of its own making and showing, falls under this category as well.”¹² Here, Tsivian

11. Lachance and Zander, “Counterpoint in Film Music: An Audiovisual Essay,” 06:35

12. Tsivian, “*Man with a Movie Camera*, Reel One,” 55.

is referring to 'trompe-l'oeil' as something that misleads or deceives the senses.¹³ Vertov wanted to mislead his audience into believing that film had been made with their tastes in mind. He wanted audiences, regardless of time or backgrounds, to be able to invest themselves into the movie. This is achieved through the use of an adjusted soundtrack that allows audiences to forget about the music and focus on the images being shown. But forgetting about the film's score isn't always possible, as connections are easy to make even though they don't exist.

Synchronicity

Syncing music and film is not a new concept. When used correctly, it can provide intense emotional appeal and provide context for scenes. But synchronicity is different. Synchronicity is "the coincidental occurrence of events and especially psychic events that seem related but are not explained by conventional mechanisms of causality."¹⁴ This means that by using a random soundtrack, it is possible to find connections that are unintentional. The most recognizable example of this phenomenon in American pop culture is the combination of Fleming's 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz*¹⁵ and Pink Floyd's 1973 album *The Dark Side of the Moon*.¹⁶ By starting the album "at the exact moment the MGM lion roars for the first time" it is possible to witness multiple instances where the music seems perfectly

13. Merriam-Webster.com. s.v. "trompe l'oeil."

14. Merriam-Webster.com. s.v. "synchronicity."

15. *The Wizard of Oz*. Directed by Victor Fleming. Culver City, California, USA: Metro Goldwyn-Mayer, 1939.

16. Pink Floyd. *The Dark Side of the Moon* (Album). mp3. Abbey Road Studios, 1973.

timed with the movie.¹⁷ Though this is purely coincidental, the effect is something that Vertov would be greatly pleased with. As Davis writes, “Every time the beat/tempo changed accordingly with the action on the screen there was an ‘ooohh!’ from the audience in reaction to the success of the experience.”¹⁸ While the audience would be invested in the images on the screen, they would also be finding connections between the movie and the soundtrack, even if none existed.

Adjusted Soundtrack Exemplified

To show that connections between films and unrelated music are coincidental, I viewed *The Man with The Movie Camera* accompanied by Pink Floyd’s *The Dark Side of the Moon*.¹⁹ I started the album when the last title card appeared and took notes on the times in which the movie and music seemed to sync up. It is through these examples that we can see how connections can be made between music and film where such a connection is not intended. This is an artistic tool that Vertov would be very pleased with. Here are some examples:

- During the opening scene with the orchestra, the lyrics of the song “Breathe (In the Air)” started at the same time the musicians began to play.
- Fades during the song “On the Run” moved from the left side of the sound stage to the right as the car moved from the left side of the road to the right.

17. Savage, Charles. “The Dark Side of the Rainbow.” *The Fort Wayne Journal Gazette*. August 1, 1995. Retrieved from webarchive.org (October 5, 2018).

18. Davis, Blair. “Old Films, New Sounds: Screening Silent Cinema with Electronic Music.” *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 17 (2008): 88.

19. Pink Floyd, *The Dark Side of the Moon*, 1973

- Alarms during the song “Time” seemed to correspond to the wheels of the train and the woman waking from her sleep.
- Gates opening with the entrance of the woman singing during the song “The Great Gig in the Sky.”

Conclusion

When watching the film for the first time, students in the class took note that the Jeff Mills soundtrack¹⁵, which was chosen arbitrarily, seemed to match up with *The Man with the Movie Camera* at certain points. This modern soundtrack, chosen as a backdrop to the film so that students would not go mad sitting in a room of silence for 66 minutes, served a secondary purpose: to invite the audience to look deeper into the film. This perfectly exemplifies Dziga Vertov’s vision for the film, where the film would better articulate how our minds dash in and out of connecting thoughts in order to make meaning of the world.

20. Remes, “The City Symphony,” 2018.

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