

Philip Cavendish. *The Men with the Movie Camera: The Poetics of Visual Style in Soviet Avant-Garde Cinema of the 1920s*. London: Berghahn, 2013. 362 pp., 47 illus., bibliography, index. \$110.00 (cloth). ISBN-13: 978-1-78238-077-1.

Can anything new be said about Soviet avant-garde cinema? Yes, there emphatically can be. Even without relying on new theories to change our perspective, the films of Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin, Aleksandr Dovzhenko, Grigorii Kozintsev and others are more accessible than ever before due to digital technology and the internet. Personal and institutional archives still conceal precious materials to be mined and refined and there is a wealth of published material in Russian, from period film press articles to memoirs and more recent publications that have had little impact on understanding in the English speaking world.

In this new book, *The Men with the Movie Camera*, Philip Cavendish proposes a fresh approach to Soviet avant-garde cinema as a whole. Rather than treat the films as being created by directors, he proposes a dualistic system, whereby the key films of the era are treated as the product of a given director's partnership with a cameraman, or as he terms it, "camera operator." Instead of the prevalent "auteur bias" (p. 244) of existing scholarship on Soviet cinema, Cavendish proposes we see the camera operators as "co-authors" of the key films. Eisenstein's key films are equally shaped by Eduard Tisse, Pudovkin's by Anatolii Golovnia, Kozintsev's by Andrei Moskvin, and Dovzhenko's by Danylo Demut'skyi. This shift in emphasis enables some very detailed analyses of films, especially in terms of their use of light, the effects of the choice of particular optics, such as the monocle lens, upon the shot, and of the composition of the frame. Such a perspective generates what we might call another level of commentary upon the dramatic action of the films. Thus, with Pudovkin's *Mother* (*Mat'*, 1926), Golovnia's use of *contre-jour* back lighting at key moments of heightened emotion is said to emphasize the implicit violence of the courtroom scene in which Pavel Vlasov is condemned, and the judge's power over human fates. These kinds of insights unquestionably enrich our understanding and appreciation of the films. That they are the fruit of careful and extensive reading of a wide range of published articles, memoirs and contemporary periodicals seen in the context of traditions of photography and art that span geographical and temporal borders stretching back before the Russian revolution and through Europe and Hollywood, and then mapped back on to attentive viewings of the films themselves is impressive. The attempt to effect a paradigm shift that nuances our grasp of the Soviet avant-garde is ambitious, and all the more impressive in that it has almost no recourse to Russian archives. It is hard to say whether the personal papers of the directors, camera operators or the studio records would have added something. I suspect that they could have, but Cavendish already has more than enough material here with which to make his central argument persuasively.

The book's presentation, however, does not always aid this cause: many of the key images discussed appear as 47 beautiful high quality frame grabs on photographic quality paper at the back of the book. While the need for such

glossy paper is clear, it is nevertheless frustrating, for this reader at least, not to have the images next to the text that describes and discusses them and not to have larger images. The production values of the book are, in this sense disappointing, and do not serve the intensity of its scrutiny well.

*The Men with the Movie Camera* builds on the paradigm established in Cavendish's previous book, *Soviet Mainstream Cinematography: The Silent Era* (2007), which concentrated on 1920s films directed by the likes of Iakov Protazanov, Fedor Otsep and Iurii Zheliabuzhskii.<sup>1</sup> There, however, the author was largely free to write without having to negotiate a substantial body of secondary literature in English. Here, even if he claims that the history of avant-garde cinema in the Soviet Union during the silent era has yet to be written, (p. 2) Cavendish's freedom in *The Men with the Movie Camera* is constricted by a number of existing studies on key directors, many of which are fairly recent, for example Anne Nesbet's *Savage Junctures: Sergei Eisenstein and the Shape of Thinking* (2003), Amy Sargeant's *Vsevolod Pudovkin: Classic Films of the Soviet Avant-Garde* (2001), and George Liber's *Alexander Dovzhenko: A Life in Film* (2002).<sup>2</sup> A partial exception to this would be the films of Kozintsev, or those produced by the Kozintsev-Moskvin partnership. These works, and those of Leningrad's *Fabrika eksentricheskogo aktera* (FEKS) group, have been the subject of good scholarship in French, but in the English language there has been very little sustained analysis of those films, such as their depiction of the Paris Commune in *New Babylon* (*Novyi Vavilon*, 1929). In each case, whether negotiating a large body of existing work or not, *The Men with the Movie Camera* assuredly illustrates its central argument.

It is nevertheless unclear why these partnerships were selected and not others: what was the criterion for selection? The book's title deliberately echoes that of Vertov's 1929 masterpiece, *Man with the Movie Camera*, and the monograph opens with a discussion of the director/camera-operator relationship, followed by a consideration of the birth of Soviet avant-garde photography during the Civil War, with newsreel, and ends with an account of the coming of sound and the end of the "golden age" of the Soviet avant-garde. While this is convincing, in each case Dziga Vertov and Mikhail Kaufman are either mentioned, or their specter haunts the narrative. The question is on what basis is the Vertov-Kaufman partnership excluded, since, even though there were sometimes other camera operators involved, it could surely still have been productively seen through Cavendish's framework.

While of course even a 362-page study has to delimit its corpus somehow, it would have been interesting to see the Vertov-Kaufman partnership discussed in this way. Its omission is possibly the result of an uncertainty in treating the fluid subject of what was not yet called documentary in the Soviet Un-

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1. Philip Cavendish, *Soviet Mainstream Cinematography: The Silent Era* (London: UCL Arts and Humanities Publications, 2007).

2. Anne Nesbet, *Savage Junctures: Sergei Eisenstein and the Shape of Thinking* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2003); Amy Sargeant, *Vsevolod Pudovkin: Classic Films of the Soviet Avant-Garde* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2001); and George O. Liber, *Alexander Dovzhenko: A Life in Film* (London: British Film Institute, 2002).

ion, a fact itself not recognized here. At one point Cavendish sees staging as synonymous with propaganda (p. 187), which suggests both concepts have been insufficiently thought through, given that staging was widely practiced in most non-fiction and newsreel films at the time whether or not they were propagandist in intention.

It may be that *The Men with the Movie Camera* avoids Vertov and Kaufman because to include them would also have meant considering the role played by the third creative force in that team, the editor, Elizaveta Svilova, whose input was probably greater than she is usually given credit for. But this is possibly because Cavendish is trying to shift attention away from the exclusive emphasis on montage as the key invention and prime creative dimension of 1920s Soviet films. Seeing the creative partnership as a tripartite collaboration might not fit the paradigm here proposed. Nevertheless, the shift towards seeing these films as the product of creative partnerships is already a very welcome restatement of the sense that these were not the product of lonely individual genius, but part of a rethinking of art as collective endeavor. The notion of the “film factory” is one familiar to students of the period, but that term’s implicit demystification of artistic labor is also habitually forgotten as scholars present film history in terms of great directors so as to confer value on the object of study, and to present narratives that can be easily understood by the reading and viewing public. *The Men with the Movie Camera* merits rich praise for its attempt to correct that distortion to a degree.

In analyzing cinema as the issue of camera operator-director couplings, Cavendish strives not only to facilitate greater understanding of the films’ aesthetic qualities but also of the ideological dimensions of the image. (p. 270) While a laudable ambition, this is not a book that really has a lot to say directly about the ideological and political subtexts. The big picture of ideology and theory are left implicit. However, the emphasis upon film and photographic form does permit another way of describing the contrast between the culture of the 1920s and 1930s, as the freedom to forge distinct and original creative partnerships ebbed and atrophied to the detriment of Soviet and world cinema.

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