

## Lost in Translation

Language, even at the most basic level, can be infinitely complex. An arrangement of squiggles can form a letter, the arrangement of these symbols can form a word, the arrangements of these words can form a sentence, and so on. Through these connections, seemingly unrelated jumbles of lines can create coherent messages and ideas. These remarkable connections spread into other worlds as well, one of which remains prominent and relevant to this day: the world of film. Even amidst a volley of strange and possibly unrelated images, humans can still find a message, perhaps based off the arrangement of the images and the content of the images themselves. Several filmmakers took advantage of this phenomenon to establish film as a language that could be universally understood; in Kamilla Elliot's words, "film images have been proclaimed a universal language".<sup>1</sup> One of the earliest and most prominent of such "universal" films is Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera*. Through elimination of intertitles, *Man with a Movie Camera* creates a near universal language to spread a comment on film's position in a communist society, but the same lack of intertitles fails to recognize the importance of context and alienates any who are not fluent in film language.

With the exception of the few times Russian text appears on signs, *Man with a Movie Camera* requires no translation, supposedly creating a universal language through sequences of video clips. Careful analysis of these sequences reveals a few of Vertov's comments on aspects of communist society, including his stance on acceptable leisure activity. His opinion appears as a contrast between bad activities in the bar and good or worthwhile activities in a worker's club. In the bar, Vertov films a group of young people drinking and talking. The atmosphere appears cheerful, but as the sequence progresses, a series of increasingly quick cuts between one hand opening beer bottles and another taking them shows how the drinking can accelerate rapidly and

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<sup>1</sup> Kamilla Elliot, *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 77.

uncontrollably. Following the quick cuts, the camera becomes handheld, apparent from the unsteady swivels as it tries to focus on the group of young people, implying that the cameraman holding the camera is drunk and struggling to keep his balance. This unsteadiness suggests that uncontrolled drinking too much can affect one's work. From this arrangement of video clips along with the techniques used to film them, Vertov shows how drinking can grow uncontrollable and how it can hinder a worker's ability, placing drinking as a leisure activity in a negative light.

From the camera's drunken stagger, Vertov dissolves into the next sequence, taking place at the V.I. Ulianov's Worker's Club, which dedicates itself to the better, more worthwhile leisure activities. In one particular clip, Vertov takes an overhead shot of two people scooping up checker pieces to the middle of the board and plays it backwards, creating the illusion that the two people were instead organizing the pieces from its prior discord. He reinforces the significance of playing the clip backwards when he does something similar with chess pieces, where two people seem to magically organize their pieces from a jumbled mess with a sweep of their hands. This transition from disorder to order may signify the film's transition from the disorderly activity of drinking to orderly activities such as intellectual games; it might also be a comment on the civilizing effect of the games themselves. In any case, the backwards clips produce a positive undertone that also seeps into the adjoining clips of people reading the newspaper, which already have a quiet, intellectual connotation attached to them. Still following the strain of worthwhile leisure activities, the next several shots follow a woman shooting paper cut-out representations of a Nazi and "Uncle Fascism", documenting a worker's duty to fight against the enemies of the state. Near the end of her shooting practice, Vertov uses a combination of two techniques to further ground his stance against reckless drinking: quick cuts between the

woman and a crate of beer bottles, and stop motion to show the beer bottles disappearing one by one. Paired together, he creates the illusion of the woman shooting down beer bottles, just as she shot down Nazism and Fascism, essentially declaring beer of an equal evil. In summary, Vertov shows that drinking as leisure is harmful and unproductive, while activities such as playing board games, reading the newspaper, and preparing to defend the state are worthwhile.

Many of Vertov's other comments can be deciphered through similar analyses of clips in the film. Since they largely rely on visual images instead of words, one can say that Vertov relays his thoughts through a language that requires no translation. However, even though Vertov makes it a point that *Man with a Movie Camera* would be "a film with no intertitles", there are still several instances when Russian text appears that somewhat aids how the audience understands the film.<sup>2</sup> In the same drinking sequence as mentioned before, right before Vertov shows the interior of the bar, he displays a sign that translates into "Bierhalle", presumably the name of the bar. This provides notable information about the location of the shots that, if left untranslated, would be unavailable to viewers who cannot read Russian. Some may argue that this information is negligible, as the audience could infer the location by the visual context of beer bottles and livelihood that accompany such settings. This argument cannot apply to a later instance when Vertov shows the sign of V.I. Ulianov's Worker's Club. General viewers might not even know what a worker's club was, so without the help of the sign, they could mistakenly assume that the following shots were taking place in someone's home, a park, or some general common area. At this point, one may argue that a detail like the setting is not entirely necessary to the greater understanding of the film, as long as the audience recognized the merit of the leisure activities in those shots. This does not change the fact that Russian-speaking audiences

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<sup>2</sup> Dziga Vertov, *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, trans. Kevin O'Brien (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 283.

would have a different, deeper understanding of the sequence at the worker's club than others. The final example appears when the woman is shooting down cut-out representations of Nazism and Fascism. The Nazi is made recognizable from the swastika symbol, but the Fascist must be characterized as "Uncle Fascism". Without this key label, the viewer is left unaware as to his identity. Other these Russian texts, some may claim that *Man with a Movie Camera* still communicates with the universal language of image.

It is interesting to note a possible reason why Vertov aspired to create a universal language: to assert film's position in communist society. One particularly self-reflexive moment occurs in the later half of the film, starting with an overhead long shot of an audience in a movie theater. Vertov cuts to a shot using stop motion on camera equipment. Possibly through double exposure, the stop motion camera appears on the screen in the theater. He then regularly cuts between the stop motion camera and smiling faces of the audience, showing that film can be used to entertain people, or specifically to instill happiness. Once the stop motion camera has moved off-screen, the image on the theater screen abruptly turns to what appears to be noise waves, accompanied by an ominous, dissonant sound. This disruption breaks an illusion, bringing the attention of the audience actually watching *Man with a Movie Camera* back to reality, causing them to realize their own disconcerted reaction. With this, Vertov suggests how discord results from the interruption of film. The noise then changes to a multiple exposure shot of a conductor, a pianist, and dancers, with various images dissolving in and out, such as a close-up of one specific dancer. A common thread of culture and art that links these images together demonstrates how film acts as a vehicle for the arts. Finally, the screen changes to a three-quarters shot of a man arming what looks to be an anti-aircraft gun, proposing that film act as a vehicle for the military as well, related to the sequence with the woman at the shooting range.

From this series of interpretation, Vertov leaves the audience with the positive impression that film is a good, integral part of a functioning communist society. A good film is meant not only to entertain, but to spread art and military awareness.

This message, however, only reaches the portion of the audience who can understand the film language fluently; for others, the film might appear incoherent and without any meaningful message. The well-versed viewer would identify connections between clips throughout the film, and from those connections, they can surmise the Vertov's messages. Meanwhile, those who cannot understand film language do not know what connections they are looking for, and thus are oblivious. This is largely because Vertov does not provide them with context through intertitles. By forsaking intertitles, Vertov underestimates the clarifying power of context, a power supported by a number of experiments in cognitive psychology. In one such experiment, researchers read a complicated, wordy passage to a group of subjects, and the subjects were then rated on their comprehension of the passage.<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, certain subjects had significantly higher comprehension ratings than others.<sup>4</sup> This is because of one sentence the subjects were told before the reading: "The paragraph you will hear will be about washing clothes".<sup>5</sup> With this, the informed subjects could then fit the information they heard into this key context, greatly improving their comprehension, while those unaware of the context of the paragraph performed considerably worse.<sup>6</sup> A similar situation occurs with *Man with a Movie Camera*, though the effects may not be as dramatic; Vertov's choice to forgo intertitles leaves the audience without immediate context. Those who understand film language would eventually create their own

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<sup>3</sup> 28. John D. Bransford and Marcia K. Johnson, "Contextual Prerequisites for Understanding: Some Investigations of Comprehension and Recall," in *Cognitive Psychology: Key Readings*, ed. David Balota and Elizabeth Marsh (New York: Psychology Press, 2004), p. 436.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 437.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 436.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 437.

context from the arrangement of videos on the screen and thus comprehend the film with greater ease; those who do not understand film language would have a much harder time creating such context and thus would struggle with comprehension. As Elliot puts it, “for audiences, film was a foreign language needing translation into their own”.<sup>7</sup> With intertitles, Vertov can provide easy, understandable context for all audience members, and in a sense, he does this a few times with instances of the Russian text, ambiguous though they may be. The tradeoff is the supposedly universal language, but even then, film language cannot be truly universal if it itself must be translated to be understood.

Even though *Man with a Movie Camera* abandons nearly all use of intertitles to create a universal language, this film cannot be said to be truly universal as long as it deprives those who cannot fluently understand film language of context. Though film language might be called universal if everyone learned it, the same could be said for any other language. To make the higher level messages in *Man with a Movie Camera* fully accessible to everyone, Vertov might have had to resort to intertitles, as the many other, conventional silent film directors did. However, in an experimental sense, with its innovative techniques, *Man with a Movie Camera* made substantial contributions to the world of film.

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<sup>7</sup> Kamilla Elliot, *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 91.