

Cinematic concepts of reality in Vertov's *Man With a Movie Camera* and Rossellini's *Rome Open City*

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Reality is a major concern in cinema – the use of it, the reflection of it, the emulation of it and the transformation of it are enormously significant issues in filmmaking, and have been since the earliest days of the medium. This is inevitable in any medium as tied to the pragmatic demands of reality as film while still being essentially founded on artifice; the relationship between that which is real and that which is invented for the benefit of the camera is fraught with tension. The question of film as a purely creative and expressive medium is straightforward in comparison – invention is invention regardless of the form it takes, but there are many different versions of cinematic “reality.”

Reality (and its cousin truth) were adopted as full-fledged cinematic ideals in the decades following World War II – from the late forties straight through the early seventies, numerous different cinematic movements orbited around the concept of reality, although their assumptions about exactly what that meant varied in subtle but significant ways. The Italian neorealists used what they had (scant film stock and decimated locations) to explore the lives of poor working people in post-war cities. In France, the *nouvelle vague* became a major influence in the 60s, while a new kind of documentary filmmaking divorced from the conventions of war cinematography and newsreels began to flourish in the United States. This fascination can be seen in the names given to these various movements – *cinema vérité*, *kinopravda*, direct cinema – each an effort to tie the films thus designated to the idea of real truth.

But one director's “reality” is another's artifice. Thoughts about exactly what the basis of film reality is vary widely: some directors value the simulation of reality as a means of facilitating the creation of truth, while others strictly insist upon the use of only that which is available in the real world. One way of examining these conflicting ideas about reality is to compare two films, each made within the ideals of different reality-

based cinematic philosophies. By juxtaposing the assumptions made about what is “real” within the context of these films, we can examine aspects of the general concept of reality in cinema. The two films discussed here will be *Man With a Movie Camera*, directed by Dziga Vertov in 1929, and *Roma città aperta (Rome Open City)* directed by Roberto Rossellini in 1945.

*Man With a Movie Camera*, commonly considered both experimental and avant-garde in nature, lacks a conventional narrative but still has a roughly linear structure, tracking a day in the life of urban Russia and by an extension drawing a portrait of city life specifically and human life in general. The film was an outgrowth of Vertov’s previous work on the Kino-Pravda newsreels of the 1920s which were philosophically based on the idea of filming life without intervention or staging, “life caught unawares.” In reality, of course, any any life caught by Vertov’s camera would have been very much aware, since any film camera of the period would have been far from unobtrusive; the loud whirr of the camera motors common at the time was the major obstacle standing in the way of the development of synchronous sound recording and the reason why films like Vertov’s remained silent until the end of the decade. By the time Vertov produced *Man With a Movie Camera*, his aesthetic had expanded to include various kinds of cinematic manipulation: time lapse, double exposure, tracking shots, reversed action, etc.

More notable in this particular film, though, is Vertov’s focus on the camera itself as the main “character” of the film. Throughout the film, while the goings-on around the cinematographer (sometimes visible in the frame and sometimes not) remain important, as often as not the actual shooting of the footage is the central action of a given scene. We see the cinematographer carrying and shooting with his tripod-mounted camera in assorted mundane, unusual, and risky places – high up on the vertical supports of bridges, in construction sites, even precariously perched on the side of a moving car. Less obvious to the viewer, of course, is the second cinematographer who’s filming the visible cameraman; Vertov’s gritty portrayal of filmmaking-as-it-happens is more carefully staged than it appears on the screen. A number of Vertov’s shots are blatantly manipulated – chess pieces that spread themselves across a board, a monumental cameraman appearing above a city skyline; all pretensions of “film truth” aside, even the

most naïve film viewer would see the obvious visual trickery involved. And predictably, Vertov received criticism for these indulgences, especially considering his early insistence on absolute reality and his casual dismissal of fictionality in film.

But Vertov's concept of reality remained rooted in the idea that that which actually exists in daily life makes the best subject for a filmmaker, and that the best way to deal with this material was to simply go out and shoot it as it unfolds. He was heavily influenced by the early documentarian Robert Flaherty and particularly his film *Nanook of the North* – interestingly, itself much more a product of careful staging and planning than of mere cinematic observation. This kind of passive artifice was still the standard way of operating in the 20s, though, and for good reason. Filmmaking was (as it still is) an enormously expensive and difficult pursuit, and pragmatism demanded that resources be conserved as much as possible. This meant that rolling costly film unnecessarily was to be avoided; that, in turn, meant that letting a camera run in public in hopes that something interesting would happen in front of it – the closest we might get to genuine reality -- was out of the question. “Reality,” then, was relative; the footage that Vertov shot, while not strictly based in reality, was still very “real” compared to what went on on the elaborate studio soundstages of the film industry, if not particularly “real” by modern cinematic standards.

Given the limitations of film in Vertov's era, the focus was then placed not upon the kind of unadulterated interaction with the world that defines “reality” in film today, but rather on use of the medium to recreate as faithfully as possible the feel of reality. Vertov may have merely been unfortunate to hold ideals about cinematic reality that were simply impossible to achieve at the time.

By the time Roberto Rossellini created the first major example of Italian neorealism – *Roma città aperta* or *Rome Open City* – at least one major revolution had occurred in cinema: the addition of integrated sound and dialogue. Cameras had become if anything much more cumbersome – the intrusive sound of the camera motor had been combated primarily by the development of massive “blimps,” usually made of steel or iron and thick rubber, which completely enveloped and isolated the noise-producing mechanism. While this change made synchronous sound recording possible, it also made

the cine camera drastically less mobile. Additionally, the demands of sync sound (which maintained sync between the camera and the sound recording device by relating both to the frequency of the mains current from which they drew power) made it impossible to shoot with sound on the fly, since the crew always had to be within cable's length of the electrical mains. Film shoots became much more grounded affairs, generally sticking to static positions in studios or on appropriate locations.

In a more specific context, Rossellini also made the film in the immediate aftermath of Rome's liberation from German occupation during World War II. In an environment where even food could be difficult to obtain, the challenges of securing and handling film stock must have been rather extreme. But the immediacy of the war was a key element of the film, which takes place in Rome during the occupation. The visible dilapidation of the city and the deprivation of its citizens is the foundation for Rossellini's particular version of cinematic reality. Unlike Vertov's film, *Rome Open City* rests on a fairly typical narrative structure revolving around the peripheral involvement of a Roman woman and a priest with members of an underground resistance movement. It's furthermore a portrait of the nation recovering from the ravages of war and a statement about the nature of war and man's proverbial inhumanity to man.

The point of Rossellini's version of cinematic reality was to recreate, as closely as he could, the details and specifics of the ideas he sought to portray – the key word here being “recreate.” Rossellini shot entirely in actual locations and used mostly nonprofessionals as actors, which grounded his film in a feel of reality. But even so, this realism is one step removed from the realism of Vertov. Where Vertov staged scenes, Rossellini actively invented them; where Vertov filmed (as much as he could) actual people doing actual things, Rossellini instead created the illusion of actual people doing actual things. It's a subtle distinction, especially given that Vertov also took greater liberties in including non-realistic material than Rossellini did, but it points to the central tension in the question of cinematic reality: what does the term “reality” mean in cinema? Is it a matter of procedure or a question of aesthetics? And is the pursuit of “reality” a worthwhile endeavor, or is it a quest for the impossible?

50s avant-garde filmmaker Maya Deren – who made it her life's work to explore the true nature of film's own logic and visual language, work she shared with Vertov

(admittedly approaching from a near-opposite set of assumptions) – was broadly dismissive of any kind of realism in film. She argued that the film camera was by its very nature little more than a recording device, and that it was the challenge of the filmmaker to rise above the reproduction of reality and to instead transform the camera into an artistic tool. She cited the example of another film from World War II which included footage shot from the gun turret of a military airplane: when the gun's trigger was pulled, the camera began shooting as well, recording everything that happened before the gun's barrel. Deren argued that this was an extreme manner of reducing filmmaking to a simple question of mechanics; the only "cinematographer" around was the gunner who pulled the trigger, while the actual filmmaker divorced herself from the process of creating a shot. This, Deren argued, was just reproduction, not art, and that other methods of incorporating reality into film were different only in degree, not in essential nature.

The unspoken contradiction at the core of that statement, though, is that even at its most mechanistic, film can never be entirely objective; in fact, real objectivity is in direct opposition to the nature of the film camera, since a camera requires some kind of human intervention (or interference) to record anything at all. Every shot, no matter how neutral or automatic, has human choice behind it – the decision to film this person rather than that one, to include this object in the frame rather than a different one, to attach the camera to the gun of an aircraft rather than the bow of a naval vessel. Actual neutral reproduction is impossible in film; therefore, the literal reduction of any cinema to a reproductive form is a fundamental error of thought. Every shot has meaning, and every film has an element of art within it.

But this would seem to mean, then, that since objectivity – and thus genuine reality – is impossible, cinematic reality is by necessity a compromised concept. Reality gives way to realism, which assumes unspoken a variable degree of artifice, and the only question that remains is, what version of reality comes the closest? Does realism reside in the circumstances in which a film is made, or does it reside in the textures and sensations of that which is portrayed? This is the basic difference between the realism of Vertov and the realism of Rossellini, and it remains an active question in cinema today, from the situational realism (but thematic artificiality) of Dogme 95 to the technical (but heavily manipulated) truth of documentary film.

At this point in film history, technology has advanced to the point that the cinematic limits that restricted Vertov and Rossellini are all but obliterated: digital video has created a filmmaking environment in which stock is one of the smallest expenses in film production; the camera is light, ridiculously mobile, unobtrusive and entirely self-contained; and our daily reality ends up on film and tape to an unprecedented degree. And yet few would find much cinematic value in footage taken by a security camera (although a few have made the effort – the results, however, often have more in common with theater than film). This implies that the value of cinematic “reality” (not to mention cinematic artifice) resides solely in the mind of the filmmaker and not within the mechanism. A camera can look, but only a mind can see.