

The Urban Themes and Stylistic Features in Vladimir Mayakovsky's Poem and Dziga Vertov's Film *Man with a Movie Camera*

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Abstract: *During the political and economic revolution of 1917 in Russia, artists of different art forms were undergoing a turmoil of modernism and Western avant-garde movements. Consequently, experiments with new creative ideas and techniques were stimulated to produce art that echoed the ever-rushing pace of urban life in the modernised society. In the midst of them all, day-to-day existence of the ordinary people in the grand metropolis were depicted with fragmented vision in both Vladimir Mayakovsky's poem "A Cloud in Trousers" and Dziga Vertov's film Man with a Movie Camera. The common features and themes in different art forms indicate the collective urban experience of the masses in Russia during that turbulent period, which were certainly fascinating and worth on-going studies.*

Keywords: Modernism, Urban life, "A Cloud in Trousers", *Man with a Movie Camera*.

1. Introduction

As the rest of Europe, Russia, seized with the frenzy of modernism, started to experience a revolution within all fields of art about a decade before the political and economic revolution of 1917. During this revolution, many writers, musicians, painters and other artists had caught up with the Western avant-garde movements, and experimented new art techniques to produce art works appropriate to their modern pace and manner of life; hence, the view on the purposes and means of art was thoroughly changed. Being a prominent poet of the revolutionary period, Vladimir Mayakovsky was against settled conventions of art, and attempted to break the taboos and rules from the past so as to devote his talent to the shaping of the future. In 1914, Mayakovsky began to write "A Cloud in Trousers", a long poem occupies a central place in his pre-revolutionary work, in which Mayakovsky expresses his protest against current tastes by placing a helpless ordinary man as the protagonist and narrator onto the streets of a terrifying big city, and using the language of everyday speech including slang, street and tavern-jargon. To reveal his own frustrations through the narrator, Mayakovsky metaphorically relates a series of fragmented scenes of imaginary normal people and surroundings in the streets to the narrator's emotions, which, in a way, appears to correspond to the technique of montage often used in filmmaking. Combining fragments of sequences is also an identical feature of Dziga Vertov's documentary film *Man with a Movie Camera* in 1929, which structures the film around a generic "day in the life" format to present the everyday chaotic activity of the city. A decade after the October Revolution in 1917, to represent the voice of the newly liberated working class, the avant-garde groups of artists committed to searching for innovative and experimental art forms. Under the influence of this trend, Vertov demanded fellow filmmakers to get rid of literary and theatrical conventions, in order to create a new form of cinema that could be universally understood. Using only visual language throughout the film *Man with a Movie Camera*, Vertov loosely connected those fragmented sequences of various glimpses of the activities in the city with the recurrent shots of the cameraman filming around the city or positioning for a shot, so that he could present the appearance of mundane

reality of city life to his audience – workers, peasants and ordinary citizens, as well as showing the process of filmmaking. For the experimental qualities of both Mayakovsky's poem "A Cloud in Trousers" and Vertov's film *Man with a Movie Camera*, how these masterpieces explore the urban themes in the forms that as innovative as their times worth ongoing studies.

2. Mayakovsky's "A Cloud in Trousers"

Mayakovsky's "A Cloud in Trousers" was originally titled *The Thirteenth Apostle*, people in the censor's office were fascinated by the way he united lyricism and crudity and wondering how he did it. This is how he responded: "I'll be like a madman if that's what you want; if you want I'll be very very tender, not a man but a cloud wearing trousers." These words were included in the prologue of the poem and became the title. In some ways, this phrase implies the way that Mayakovsky, out of his contradictory nature, frequently employed the juxtaposition of lyrical expressions and informal daily speech in his work, and the phrase may as well be used to mock those who judged superficially. Whoever or whatever appearing to be tough on the outside may be tender and vulnerable on the inside. At the end of the prologue in "A Cloud in Trousers", Mayakovsky proclaims a familiar modernist/futurist anti-beauty through the narrator that, he refuses to appreciate the external beauty of the French port city Nice itself, but embraces the ugliness he sees in people (inside of the city) instead: "Again in song I glorify / men as crumpled as hospital beds, / and women as battered as proverbs." Similar uses of similes and metaphors go through the whole poem, as Mayakovsky continues to play with irony and sincerity while describing the fragmented experiences of the narrator within the city. The poem is categorised as a tetraptych, which is a set of four inscribed tablets. The four sections after the prologue, according to Mayakovsky himself, represented: "(1) down with your love! (2) down with your art! (3) down with your society! (4) down with your religion!" They together build up the work he referred to as a "catechism" of present-day art that can only be applied to in a negative, destructive sense.

The first section of the poem starts with the narrator's unhappy love story with a girl named Maria in Odessa. As the narrator is waiting for Maria to show up as promise, and strolling around the enormous city for hours and hours, he dramatizes his feelings and disappointment toward love by reflecting those emotions on the glimpses of surroundings and modern vehicles among the city street ("I stood hunched by the window, / and my brow melted the glass" "a love that shies at the hooting of cars, / that adores the bells of horse-trams." etc.). At the same time, the language is switching between the slangy (ex: "It should be a teeny-weeny, / humble, little love;") and the poetic (ex: "I wait, / splashed by the city's thundering surf."), which maintains the artistic pursuit of breaking the rules of conventional poetry, as well as relating to ordinary people's understanding of language usages. While later, Maria seems to show up finally and declares her marriage to the narrator, his disappointment upon love "In love, I shall gamble again" leads to the switch to another imaginary scene of the homeless tramps and beggars among the street, since he is so down that he compares his chance of being loved by the person he wants with the tramp's chance of finding shelter on the street. Keeping the narrator of the poem wandering in the city all the time, Mayakovsky relates the individual pains and frustration of the narrator (and may well be his own) to others living among the city, perhaps indicating that in this terrifying big city, people from different backgrounds, better or worse, could have been experiencing equal sadness and helplessness. This factor is further enhanced, as the narrator later speaks up his sorrowful mind underneath his superficial calmness to the "Gentlemen, Amateurs of sacrilege, crime, and carnage", another group of people in the street. These externally unrelated descriptions of the people and surroundings in the city are, in fact, sharing an inner connection associated with the narrator's train of thoughts. Constantly speaking about emotions, feelings and reflecting them upon the objects and people around the city in the narrator's voice, Mayakovsky dramatizes how his overwhelming feelings are larger than he is, just like he says in the poem "I feel / my 'I' / is much too small for me". It establishes the grandiose tone of the narrator; after he shadows his feelings over the city, he raises his tragic rejection by Maria to a world-historical level with the comparison of himself to Vesuvius and Lusitania.

To endeavour to make a change to the situation, in section two, the narrator examines the "books" representing the art and knowledge that were influencing the shaping of the present and future of city, and concludes that "the tongueless street merely writhes / for lack of something to shout or say." with the old poetry with "twittering rhymes". In addition, an appealing portrait of the modern cityscape with "bulging taxis and bony cabs bristled" further indicates that a revolution pursuing new knowledge and new forms of expressions appropriate to the present, and able to represent the "street folk" – students, prostitutes, salesmen and so on, is needed. The narrator declares that the "street folk", the ordinary people have the equal rights to shape their present and future, to give the city of their times "something to shout and say", just as the poets and other artists from the past did about their times. However, after fomenting an enthusiastic revolution by getting rid of the restrictive aesthetic of the past, calling for new poetry and art that embraces the normal and the ugly of mundane everyday reality of the city, the life of the ordinary people, and the street folk respond and rise up, Mayakovsky's

narrator doesn't join the revolution crowd; instead, he offers his soul as a banner to the rebellion. This splitting position of the narrator is interesting, as part of him remains with the revolution crowd, but not his physical participation. In section three, as the revolution happens around in the city, the narrator slumps in the corners of saloons. The speaker appears to keep a low profile, and places himself in a rather silent and humble position, contrasting the way he places himself at the centre of almost everything in the former sections. After the excess of passion he reveals while posing his ideals in a grandiose manner, Mayakovsky's narrator manages to draw back and express the disappointment at his own ordinaries: " I, who praised the machine and England, / I am perhaps quite simply / the thirteenth apostle / in an ordinary gospel." Despite his high ideals, he realizes that he is also an ordinary member of the street folk, there's still no utopia after the revolution, which is shown in the final section that brings us back to the narrator's devastating love stories with Maria. In sorrow, the narrator, again, feels that the city also weeps for his sorrow, as he describes "rain has drowned the sidewalks in sobs". After the revolution, the attempt to make a difference, life goes on, people still have to deal with the disappointments in life, because this is just a regular aspect of everyday life. After all, the revolution may be just a page in the book of history, a page in one's personal diary.

3. Vertov's Film *Man with a Movie Camera*

In the meantime, Vertov's film *Man with a Movie Camera* appeals to viewers as its experimental style makes it look like a recording excerpt from a cameraman's diary. However, the cameraman, played by Vertov's brother Mikhail Kaufman is also in a splitting position. The film shows a regular day of the cameraman's life filming around the city; hence, we are watching the footage of a second, uncredited filmmaker who films the cameraman's filming tour of the city; in this case, the cameraman can be seen as just any other ordinary professionals in the city doing his jobs recording various sequences of life-facts in public. Vertov also identified himself as a worker among others, considering the camera as the instrument for an artist to penetrate the essence of external reality. Therefore, he saw documentaries as the only valid form of film, which could be a powerful revolutionary force that had an impact on people's consciousness of viewing city life as a whole; with the visual language that is understandable to all, cinema could be used as a means to educate ordinary citizens to build the new society. To present the mundane daily life of the city in an art form accessible to all, as well as filling the blank of filmmaking industry at that time that, there had not yet been a film about cinema, Vertov experimented with the cinematic language in the film *Man with a Movie Camera*. The film's introductory credits describe the *Man with a Movie Camera* as an unscripted cinematic presentation of visual events without the aid of intertitles, without sets and actors. The film kicks off with a cameraman "climbing up" to the top of a giant camera to set up to observe the "city". Then the cameraman enters a cinema that is being prepared for the screening of *Man with a Movie Camera* for the upcoming audience. With the addition that the film also ends with reappearances of the image of audiences in the cinema, the whole film is framed up with the engagement of the filmed audience, to include the presentation of this experimental form of modern entertainment in this film about cinema. After the

prologue, *Man with a Movie Camera* follows the course of a normal day, beginning in the early morning, as a woman and other people wake up and start their working day in various factories, shops, transport depots and so on, the city is awake with various activities of people and vehicles, and gradually catches an intense pace of modern city life around the efficient operations of the industrial factories that generate energy and manufacture daily supplies for people, as well as the heavy yet efficient traffic relying on trams, cabs, buses and other modern transports along the roads. The dense editing of montage shows the constant switching of images and sequences of people's life from different aspects assembles the general idea of city life as a whole. As the cameraman begins his tour through the awakening busy city, the miners also start working to dig the coal that fuels the operation of the factories that spring to action, the repeated showing of images of the working machinery is also identical for the industrial age. While getting through the crowds among the streets by foot or on a moving vehicle, he observes the groups of travelling passengers on the move, as well as capturing the motion of a trotting horse on a moving carriage, which further shows the unscripted quality of the filming process; the cameraman seems to capture anything that interests him on the road. Periodically, the shots become freeze-frames, this method appears to be innovative and let the viewers to take a moment to appreciate the still images of an instant movement, which reminds the viewers that the moving pictures are composed of a series of still images. What's more, the film also shows these images as strips of celluloid in labelled rolls on the editing table of Yelizaveta Svilova, Vertov's wife and the film's actual editor. That cutting through the film of "a day in the life" content showing the editing process behind the film, could also include the other filmmakers of the film as part of the city.

As the activities continue in the city, there are couples getting married and divorced during this one day at the same place; a funeral takes place while at some other place, a baby is born. Though in fact, the film could not have been filmed within one day, this film merely captures the happiness and pain, other different emotions of people in daily life in the city, and various events happening in different places. Numerous cutting of daily events in life in the city not just build up the image of the city's movement as a whole, but also presents people's ups and downs in their circles of life.

4. Conclusion

The ending speeding-up the cutting of montage also emphasises the efficiency of development and indicates that the city is developing and moving forward faster and faster along with the modernization and industrialisation, concludes an idealised image of the daily life of the big city, as people work cheerfully and harmoniously as a collective presented throughout the film. Both Mayakovsky's "A Cloud in Trousers" and Vertov's film *Man with a Movie Camera* are experimental art forms that assemble the collections of fragmented scenes of people and events happening throughout the cities, which are the very source of life pumping through the veins of the metropolis.

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Filmography

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