

Introduction

The visual evidence of the human and/or camera recording a scene can be used as a strategy to add varying levels of authenticity to a work. It does such by providing (or not) a reminder of what we are watching: the work of a machine capturing light at the behest and guidance of a human eye. This choice to include: to show the camera or its worker, makes the audience privy to a whole series of dynamics that lead us to new interpretations of subjectivity and objectivity within the work.

This inclusion or exclusion of visual (as we are still in the silent age) representation of *what* is taking this footage is a distinct choice. And this choice has drastically different effects in terms of how it can create a sense of (mis)trust of the documentarian, and the document itself. This visual inclusion/exclusion of the camera and its worker manifests itself in three very different ways in *Man With a Movie Camera* (Vertov, 1929), *À propos de Nice* (Vigo, 1930), and *Nanook of the North* (Flaherty, 1922); and to three very different ends.

Man With a Movie Camera

Vertov's *Man With a Movie Camera* is rumination on the speed and workings of a city and of machines (including the camera). Fast paced, the movie skips back and forth from scenes of the 'man with the movie camera' finding increasingly interesting vantage points and his consequent recordings: a train overhead, a train below, people brushing past on the streets, women riding in cars and blushing at the camera's attention. To then close up shots of the camera and the process of its creation: the lens itself adjusting and refining an unknown subject, the filmstock being run through the editing table, etc.

Man With a Movie Camera documents Vertov's relationship with the camera, as well as the city's reaction to Vertov *as* camera. There is a joining of Vertov/the director and the camera that leaves us as witnesses of their interactions. However it is a relationship that also allows us to occupy a third space, as tertiary viewers. By highlighting the relationship between him, the camera, and his subjects, Vertov is making a film about films, and introducing each as their own subjects.

In creating a film about films, *Man With a Movie Camera* also becomes about its audience. Vertov is directing *us* as opposed to his subjects: we are not Vertov/the camera, and we are also not the strangers or machines he is filming, we are the third. We are able to switch

back and forth after the fact, from being the camera to now being the ones filmed: we are invited to witness the entirety of the filming process and in doing so Vertov is offering us an omniscient perspective. Through this blatant explanation of how the images came to be, we are being asked to recognize who's eyes it is being seen through, and then to wonder what our camera would see if that was us, not Vertov. Beyond just admitting the subjective, Vertov is making us the narrator. He is pushing us to take an agency in what we are watching and what we will need to and can make next.

À propos de Nice

Boris Kaufman, the cinematographer of *À propos de Nice* was, "heavily influenced by Vertov's ideas, and used a full range of kino-eye devices" (pg 83, Macdonald) We catch rare glimpses of the camera or the cameraman in *À propos de Nice*. And as opposed to *Man With a Movie Camera*, we are called to be behind the camera with Kaufman. The first time this is brought to our attention is on the corniche, the camera circling around a generic looking man, in front of a generic looking camera and tripod. When the man notices the camera, he looks at us and laughs. This person could easily be the person behind our camera, and perhaps is meant as such.

Soon after is a series of shots of buildings on their side that are then returned to right-side up with a quick jolt of the camera; a yanking arc from right to left. And then onto the next ! Slowly coming to stronger and stronger focal points with each subject. This forceful camera movement repeated brings our attention to our own physical reactions, our own reactionary strains and releases, as though we are moving with the camera. Here, instead of Kaufman/Vigo mimicking the cameraman in a shot of a substitute or association, we, the audience, are being made to mimic the camera.

The last scene I will reference is roughly eight minutes into the film. In a quick three seconds, we are able to glimpse, even momentarily focus on, the cameraman's shadow on the sidewalk as he tracks a dog walking by. We are looking at our mirror, our reflection. Here is perhaps the pinnacle of this argument, that Kaufman and Vigo are inviting us to be behind the camera with them. They are inviting us to be complicit in their subjectivity, and Kaufman says as much, both in film and essay, "Social Documentary is distinct from the ordinary short film and the weekly newsreel in that its creator will establish his own point of view". (pg 83, Macdonald)

Perhaps Kaufman and Vigo are utilizing this to garner our trust, by humbly admitting to the human and the subjective.

Nanook of the North

Diverging from what we have seen so far, Robert Flaherty in *Nanook of the North* is deliberate not to bring our attention to the camera, or his presence behind it. This approach has lent itself to the impression that we are witnessing something left undisturbed: a genuine record from an omniscient source. And to reassure these impressions, the messages of Flaherty's films (*Nanook of the North* included) summon feelings of the universal and the pure. Jean Rouch says of Flaherty that he, "thought that everyone in the world had a message which was common to all men," (pg 266, Macdonald), and such a vein can be spotted manifest in *Nanook of the North's* cinematography and narrative.

Through use of intertitles Flaherty at once surpasses the camera to become a better 'eye', and at the same time a godly force. The prime example is of Nanook preparing to build an igloo and licking his ivory knife over and over. We can assume what it is for, and Flaherty tells use through use of intertitles: it is to ice the blade so as to cut more smoothly through the snow. However an added note at the end completely changes the narrator's role from explicitly reinforcing the visual, to adding an element unable to be discerned by the camera, and in turn by us. Flaherty adds that the knife, "instantly is glazed with ice." - a detail the camera is unable to capture, and therefore we are not privy to. The narrator has the ability to see and know something in real time we cannot. This grouping of the audience and the camera: of making us as knowledgeable as *it*, exposes a space for the narrator to take on the role of illumination and elucidation.

The ending scenes of the film augment this understanding. We are shown Nanook and his family undressing and getting into bed, and then shown outside the dogs preparing to sleep, and we go back and forth to the end sequence of the dogs and the family now asleep. We are left awake in the night, looking in on Nanook and across the plain as though the narrator was showing us all this from up in the sky. Although I think this is far from the cumulative effect of the film, I do see what I think to be an intentional detachment of Flaherty/the narrator from the camera and its human worker. I read this as Flaherty seeking to be a voice and proponent of the truth and the real, while perhaps doing exactly the opposite.

Conclusion

In each of the three films discussed so far, Vertov, Vigo/Kaufman and Flaherty each took substantially different approaches to calling our attention to, and creating a relationship between subjectivity and authenticity. I found the varying portrayals of the camera and its human eye in each of the films a particularly compelling thread to analyze in regards to just that: subjectivity and authenticity.

Vertov, the most explicit of the three, occupied a large portion of *Man With a Movie Camera* with shots of both the camera and its worker, and he attempted honesty through these explicit admittances. Vigo/Kaufman borrowed slightly from Vertov in calling our attention to the camera and its worker, however they did so with extreme subtlety: through shadows, stand-ins, etc. And in consequence, we were called to collaborate in the subjectivity of *À propos de Nice* through identification with the director and his camera. Flaherty in *Nanook of the North* attempted to reveal a world, its emotions and lessons, that are universal to all. Working to this end, Flaherty assumed the role of facilitator or curator, and he became the omniscient, or universal voice.

Each film worked to create and bring our attention to subjectivity and authenticity with unique philosophies, particularly so through choices of representing the camera and its worker.

Bibliography

Macdonald, K., & Cousins, M. (2006). *Imagining reality: the Faber book of the documentary*. London: Faber and Faber.