Philip Cavendish


The films of the Soviet 1920s are widely known, widely admired, and widely studied. When we think of Soviet avant-garde culture, films such as *The Battleship Potemkin* and *Man With a Movie Camera* spring to mind. Figures associated with this innovative cinema such as Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin, Dziga Vertov, and Oleksandr Dovzhenko are famous, for they did much to develop cinema as an art form and to help make it “the most important of all the arts,” as Lenin famously declared it. But what about the names of Eduard Tisse, Anatolii Golovnia, Andrei Moskvin, and Danylo Demuts'kyi? They may be familiar to film scholars of the period, but, as Philip Cavendish argues in this engrossing book, their names should be as widely-known as the greats listed above, for they were the real “men with the movie cameras” and did much to make the films of the 1920s as innovative as they were.

Cavendish’s book is full of insights and details that will delight both experts on the topic and relative neophytes interested in learning more about the remarkable decade of early Soviet cinema. There is much to praise here, but two aspects stand out. The first, and most significant, is in Cavendish’s thorough analysis of camerawork itself, the “poetics of composition and lighting techniques” that he rightly declares “a neglected aspect of cinema studies” in general and Soviet cinema studies in particular (1). Cavendish reminds us that films in the 1920s had both a director’s scenario and an “operator’s scenario.” The cameramen of the time therefore worked in tandem with directors, became iconic figures in their own right, and even “succeeded in engineering their own myth (4).” Through a detailed analysis of the theories, practices, and training with which Soviet filmmakers engaged, Cavendish makes a provocative yet convincing case that camera operators should best be viewed as “co-directors,” and thus co-authors of some of the most famous films of the 1920s. Soviet avant-
garde culture in general—not to mention Soviet culture broadly speaking—privileged collectivity, and the camera became an emblem of Soviet modernity and its attempts to capture the collective. These notions guided the work of cameramen such as Tisse, Golovnia, Moskvin, and Demuts'kyi, who worked as cameramen for Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Kozintsev, Dovzhenko, and other famous directors. All, as Cavendish explains, developed their own trademark signatures and all played major roles in some of the most well-known sequences of the decade. Through detailed case studies of the four cameramen named above and the directors or studios they worked with most often, Cavendish provides a powerful corrective to the tendency to view the Golden Age of Soviet avant-garde cinema through the auteur theory that often treats Eisenstein, Pudovkin, et al as singular geniuses. They were brilliant filmmakers, but so too were their cameramen.

The second aspect of Cavendish’s book worth highlighting is the number of details he has recovered about the relationships between directors and their cameramen. The Men with the Movie Camera is primarily structured through four chapters: one on Tisse and Eisenstein, one on Golovnia and Pudovkin, one on Moskvin and “the Factory of the Eccentric Actor (FEKS, an experimental group that included Kozintsev and Trauberg),” and one on Demuts'kyi and Dovzhenko. Each chapter contains biographical details of how these pairings functioned as co-authors in the films of the era. Tisse and Eisenstein, for example, began collaborating in 1923. The director directly acknowledged the work of his cameraman in shaping his film style, even publishing an essay in 1939 that explained it and declaring at various times that it was impossible to separate his work from that of Tisse’s. Yet, as Cavendish relates, their working relationship rested on “an understanding that was so instinctive that it did not apparently require explicit communication (59),” one reason why eventually Eisenstein’s name only became associated with their collaborations. On one level, therefore, Cavendish uses available biographical details to narrate the conjoined stories of the men who wielded cameras. Each chapter also contains detailed analyses of scenes and filmmaking techniques that in turn restore the nature of the work itself and how these cameramen made essential contributions to particular films. Moskvin’s rendering of the character Louise Poiret in Kozintsev’s and Trauberg’s New Babylon, for example, helped to “fix” the portrait of this important figure in the film (225), while Demuts'kyi’s decision to use a monocle lens for Dovzhenko’s Earth provided the soft-focus images that defined that film. In these readings Cavendish also pays particular attention to the other artistic interests of directors and cameramen and how painting, photography, etchings, and other arts informed their styles. The end result is not just a more thorough picture of early Soviet film culture, but of Soviet avant-garde culture in general.