

# HISTORICAL ESSAYS AND REVIEWS



**CARL MAYER**

## **How I Came Up with the Idea for the Berlin Film**

First published as "Wie ich zuerst zur Idee des Berlin-films kam, " in *B,Z. Berlin*, no.252, September 27, 1927

Berlin has always held a special place in my heart, inspiring my creativity and imagination, and heightening my productivity. I owe decisive ideas—such as those for *\*Caligari\**, *\*Scherben\**, *\*Sylvester\**, *\*Der letzte Mann\**, and many others—to the streets, places, and air of Berlin. Once again, I was filled with plans for a film set in the big city. I walked from Zoo Station to the Gedächtniskirche at dusk. It was one of those evenings when everyone who loves Berlin feels entranced by the city's unique atmosphere. Trains thundered. Lights! Cars! People! Everything intertwined. Evening bells rang from the church.

Suddenly, it came over me: Berlin! What a wonderful city! What if you were an actor and chose yourself as the main character—the hero of a film? Then, the title came to me: \*Berlin, Berlin, a Symphony!\* \*Berlin, the Symphony of the Big City!\* Just as musical themes might rise from a musician in a symphony of sound, so too did images rise within me—sudden, intoxicating, in a state familiar to productive people. A whole series of images condensed into chords. It was as if I suddenly heard the thousand-voiced melody of this city. Streets, squares, and entire complexes of Berlin flashed before me, blending into one another.

Gigantic Berlin! Stretching out of sleep. From all houses, on all streets, the city grew toward the day. This day was to be again, from morning to morning—a day in Berlin, with its millions of faces rising up. The hustle and bustle of the metropolis appeared in images of life: lives otherwise lived, rattling and racing past each other. Work! Splendor! Misery! Light! Life! Death! A symphony of reality, orchestrated with authenticity. The film was to use movement, rhythm, and camera angles to capture these themes. Through editing, it would become a symphony to carry the viewer away—just as the idea had gripped me in that moment of inspiration. It is a hymn to the city, the era, the century—to film itself.

Several years ago, I entrusted Lupu Pick, with whom I had collaborated on several projects, with my plan. I fondly remember his enthusiasm. To the credit of the experts, it should be said that people like Murnau, Jannings, and Freund understood the meaning and intention of my idea. The latter seemed unable to let go of it. A combination of Freund and Ruttmann was considered to execute the film. However, when the project reached the stage of realization, Julius Außenberg [the general director of Fox Europa Film] now learned of it. Though not directly exposed to the public, he was convinced and captivated by the novel ideas. He rose above the whisperers and the warners. With astonishing inspirational ability, he pursued the project to completion, committing himself to the film—even in its final days, in a fight against authority.



## **„Walther Ruttmann writes to us: Berlin? - Berlin!“**

In: *Der Filmspiegel* no. 5, May 1927

I consider the most important factors of my Berlin film to be:

1. Consistent implementation of the musical and rhythmic demands of the film, because film is the rhythmic organization of time through visual means.
2. Consistent avoidance of filmed theater.
3. No staged scenes! Human processes and people were “stalked.” This “feeling of being unobserved” created immediacy of expression.
4. Every process speaks for itself—in other words: no titles!

## WALTHER RUTTMANN

### Berlin as Film Star

First published as "Berlin als Filmstar," in *B.Z., Berlin* (September 20, 1927).

For the first time, an attempt has been made to make a great city the bearer of the leading role in a film. No actor, forever performing a bit of theater; no child, who is in itself more cinematic than an adult; no animal star of the new Fox Europa Film: BERLIN. THE SYMPHONY OF A GREAT CITY. Berlin alone carries the film.

Berlin, the most interesting of all cities—because it is the youngest among the metropolises of the world; because it is a city still in the process of becoming and not yet suffocated behind façades, crushed beneath its own monumentality; Berlin, a city of ceaseless striving, is the center, the theme, and the sole actor of my symphonic work.

Once I had decided to take the "great city" as the subject of a film, only Berlin could be considered. For film, as the "art of movement," young Berlin, filled with limitless possibilities, is the most rewarding object imaginable.

This modern stone hydra displayed moods during filming such as hardly any human diva could match. The work lasted more than a year, until the multifaceted character of Berlin had been captured on film in many thousands of small and tiniest shots. Without a studio, without constructed sets, under difficult conditions, I constantly had to lie in wait with my little detective camera. I had to plunge into the life of the metropolis and record everything unnoticed, for none of the subjects was allowed to know that filming was taking place or, conscious of being filmed, begin to "act."

Babylonian towers of film material accumulated. They had to be sifted and organized so that, out of the chaos, there might emerge a mosaic, a **Symphony of a Great City**—a symphony of the city with which I wrestled for an entire year. Whether it has been mastered, whether its chameleon-like face has been captured on the strip of celluloid—the forthcoming premiere will show.

NUMMER 658

*Illustrierter*

9. JAHRGANG 1927

# *Film-Kurier*



**BERLIN**

**DIE SINFONIE DER GROSSSTADT**  
**EIN FILM VON WALTHER RUTTMANN**

# WALTHER RUTTMANN

## Berlin. Die Sinfonie der Großstadt

In: *Illustrierter Film Courier*, Berlin, No. 658 (September 23, 1927)

It seems impossible to make a film without a plot, romantic conflicts, and a happy ending. Or so you would think. What could possibly come of it? Perhaps didacticism, obscurity, and boredom. That is why I must confess that nothing bothers me more than boredom. I dislike traditional forms of art unless I can appreciate them reverently. Thankfully, we are reaching a point where serious, professorial expressions are no longer prerequisites for appreciating art. We have the right to appreciate art however we like, including what entertains and uplifts us, even if it is serious.

The film Berlin showed me that it's possible to create art without compromise today. Some things had to be broken with. Above all, it was necessary to break free from theater, something every good film strives to do. The film's main strength is its uncompromising honesty and objectivity. The goal wasn't to have the actors play as naturally as possible, but rather to capture the diverse feelings of people who believe they are unobserved. This could only be achieved by approaching unsuspecting people as a hunter approaches prey. Only in this way could the convincing authenticity of the life stories be achieved.

The second requirement was the strictest organization of time according to musical principles. The pianissimo must be played consistently until it reaches fortissimo. Minor and major keys must be logically interwoven or sharply contrasted. A counterpoint must arise from the rhythm of machines and humans. The musical nature of the film enabled composer Edmund Meisel to contribute to the cinematic symphony in a revolutionary manner. For the first time, film music was established as an independent element of the overall work. Through this film, I hope to demonstrate that life is exciting, varied, and dramatic even without literature or theater.



## WALTHER RUTTMANN

### How I Made My Berlin Film

In: *Lichtbildbühne* no. 241 (October 8, 1927)

I believe the time has come to say a few words about the origins, development, and completion of my Berlin film. Throughout the many years I spent creating moving images with abstract means, I could not escape my longing to work with living material and create a film symphony from the millions of kinetic energies already present in the urban landscape. After meeting Karl Freund, who shared similar ideas, I realized this goal could be achieved.

The long preliminary discussions with Freund came to an end. He found someone with the courage to support the project: Julius Außenberg, the general director of Fox Europa. Now, I stood alone before my work. From the beginning, I knew that to create the film I wanted, I would have to take full responsibility for every shot, as well as the lighting, tempo, and atmosphere of each frame. Filming began, and with it came a long period of physical exertion and tests of patience for me and my loyal cameramen. For weeks on end, we met at 4:00 a.m. to film "the dead city." Of course, we could not simply set up our equipment and start filming. Berlin strove to elude my implacable lens. Countless situations were thwarted by some false note just before we could capture them. There was a constant, thrilling fever of the hunt, as well as constant excitement and changes of plans. For instance, we had planned to film scene 183, but abruptly had to abandon those plans to seize the opportunity to film scene 297.

The most difficult scenes to film were perhaps those of Berlin asleep. It's easier to work with tempo and agitation than to maintain consistent movement in a calm, static setting. Day after day, I rode through the city in my film truck, outwitting the pampered residents of Kurfürstendamm in the West and capturing the poorest echelons of Berlin in the Scheunenviertel. The footage was developed daily. Very slowly, in a way visible only to me, the first act began to take shape. After each editing attempt, I could see what was missing—an image for a gentle crescendo here, an andante there, a metallic sound, or a flute note. Thus, I continually determined what new shots were needed and what motifs to look for. Throughout the production, I repeatedly modified the manuscript's form.

Soon, the problem of nighttime and interior shots arose. The usual methods, such as using light trucks, could not be employed in these settings without compromising

consistency. I discussed these difficulties with my cameraman, Reimar Kuntze. Driven by necessity, he managed to sensitize the film material. This allowed us to capture scenes regardless of the lighting conditions. Now, we could capture people, traffic, and nightlife in the streets, as well as real life in taverns, dance clubs, athletic arenas, and cinemas. In short, we could show everything necessary to let people experience Berlin's vibrant nightlife.

However, while editing, I realized how difficult it would be to capture the symphonic curve I had envisioned. I discarded many beautiful shots because I didn't want to make a picture book. Instead, I wanted to create something akin to the structure of a complex machine that can only function properly if every tiny piece fits precisely into the next.

Many people are accustomed to hearing that we are only now learning to experience movement. Just as everything must be reduced to the simplest formula for children, the same holds true here. I believe that most people who experience the exhilaration of movement in my Berlin film won't know where it comes from. However, if I can immerse them in the experience and show them Berlin, then I will have achieved my goal and proven myself right.

\*

A shorter version of the above essay was published in *The New York Times* on May 20, 1928, ahead of the film's New York premiere.

## THE FILMING OF "BERLIN"

**By WALTHER RUTTMANN.**  
**I** BELIEVE the time has come to say a few words about the making of my film. During my many years' association with abstract movements, it was always my fondest idea to build with living material and to create a "film symphony" out of the millions of existing energies which form the life of a big city. The possibility of realizing such a film arose after my meeting Karl Freund, who had similar ideas.

One day the long conferences I had with Freund were terminated. In Julius Auenberg, the Fox director, he had found the only man who would take the responsibility for this work. Now I faced alone the tremendous task. From the start it was clear that the full responsibility for every single "shot," the lighting, the tempo and mood of every foot of film had to be in my hands to really assure the materialization of what I originally had in mind. When actual "shooting" started, my faithful camera men and myself had to undergo quite a good deal of physical strain and trying patience for a long while. For weeks we came together every morning around 4 o'clock to turn out the "dead" city. Naturally, it wasn't possible to just look around and "shoot." It was strange how the huge city itself, Berlin, tried to evade my efforts to capture something of its life and rhythm with the camera. Innumerable were the times when some false "tone" at the last moment spoiled a situation which had been almost completely caught by the camera. With us it was a case of continual "hunting" fever, thrills and suspense to be encountered at every turn. At one moment, let's say, Scene 188 was ready for "shooting" when an abrupt and unexpected change in what was happening on the street made it necessary to jump to Scene 297. Perhaps the most difficult parts of "shoot" were those of the sleeping city. It is very much easier to operate with rhythm and movement than to maintain continuity in a complete sense of quiet and deathly stillness. Day after day I drove around Berlin in my "shooting" car, trying to capture the life of the fashionable Kur-

firstendamm district, as well as that of the slums. Every day the amount of negative exposed was developed and I viewed the "rushes" privately. Slowly the shape and structure of the film's first act began to take form under my eyes. After every trial cutting I noticed what was still lacking. There a bit for a tender crescendo, here an andante. From this conclusion I made up my mind every day as to what new motifs I had to look for so that my script underwent changes and additions in content, form and structure all throughout my work on the film.

At last the problem of "shooting" night scenes and interiors arose. In order to achieve an absolute authenticity in "shooting" our night scenes, we had to dispense with the usual arc lamps and Klieg lights, because these would attract attention and would make the people conscious of the camera and therefore wary of our approach. I went into conference with my chief camera man, Reimar Kuntze, and he succeeded in making the film so sensitive that we were independent of lighting conditions. Now it was possible to capture the night life of the city, the swarming traffic, crowds, interior of theatres, cafés, bars, dance halls, cinemas, variety shows, concert halls and the dazzling electric signs in the street. In short, everything that I needed to give a perfect and complete representation of the night life in Berlin.

While preoccupied with the cutting of the film, I realized how difficult it was to achieve a symphonic "curve" or form in the film. Many beautiful individual scenes had to be cut out to avoid the effect of a series of static pictures. The structure of such a complicated machine, in creating the desired movement and to make the heterogeneous episodes an organic whole, had to consist of related incidents fitted to each other which would grip one by their intensity.

There are many who are accustomed to hear, but we are only now learning to live movements. As you reduce problems for a child to a simple formula, it had also to be done in making "Berlin."





## CONTEMPORARY REVIEWS

**WILLY HAAS**

**Berlin im Film**

In: *Film-Kurier*, No. 226, September 24, 1927

Finally, something has happened here. Even considering only the most basic of what has occurred, it is commendable: a decisive break with feature films and films made by actors and actor-directors. There is a resolute and courageous commitment to fundamental film principles, such as image sequence and length, camera angles, and

passing by instead of false dramatic geometry. This principle is organically grounded in the filmstrip passing in front of the viewer.

However, this film has not entirely escaped the danger of subjective arbitrariness and pictorial-musical impressionism. This includes the creator's arrogant, unprincipled, and unconstructive nature, as well as an exaggerated belief in creative chaos. These tendencies lead to eccentricity or empty refinement, neither of which belongs entirely to our time.

The feature film is certainly an imperfect imitation. However, it has the meaning of a fictitious auxiliary construction. It makes demands that extend into the realm of cinema, providing material with which cinematic success can be precisely demonstrated and measured. Filmmakers must adhere to clearly defined cinematic tasks to reveal the extent of their talent. In this film, however, Ruttmann did not set any tasks for himself. Instead, he drew freely from cinematic material. How can such an achievement be measured?

Obviously, by whether he used both hands. Future films should avoid dramatic, theatrical, symphonic, and musical elements. There should be no Wagnerianism in the future of film. Any new developments must grow organically from the technical conditions of film photography itself. Before any further demands can be made, the creator must have complete control over the process. They must be free to use all technical possibilities to create.

What are these possibilities? First are photographic settings and tricks. Second are image antitheses. Third are the possibilities of large, gripping image reporting and striking, captivating life reportage.

Many of these demands have been realized here, yet one does not necessarily get the feeling of complete realization. The extraordinary overall impression is achieved through a kind of compromise. Ruttmann constantly vacillates between possibilities, allowing one to support the other. He navigates the somewhat indeterminate realm of "film rhythm," pointing to a realm disparate from film: music. The film is conceived in a specific musical way. However, as film critics, we are reluctant to become music critics. We recognize when the film hits the nail on the head. Even in this film, which stands head and shoulders above the rest conceptually, we feel that some shortcuts were taken. Not everything that is striking is inexpressible. It can be expressed simply and without fuss, with the divine sobriety of genius.

Ruttmann is somewhat of an amateur. Today, that is the highest praise—he has kept himself free of all ingrained professional superstition. He can do a lot. However, he must continue creating and learning until he feels he can do anything a human being can do in film.

We want a time when being a great amateur is no longer praised. Rather, we want to see great professionals without atavistic inhibitions.

ANON.

Review in *Der Kinematograph*, September 24, 1927, p. 21

[...] Berlin is seen here through the eyes of a traveler whom the awakening morning brings on the express train towards Berlin, through the suburbs to the Anhalter Bahnhof. Now the dawning day meets him in the quiet streets, which are gradually filling with people rushing to work in factories and trying to reach their destinations by ring railway, bus, subway, tram, and car.

The images are incomparable, the rhythm of the machines hammering in a wild beat. And the further the day progresses, the more lively the city becomes. The West awakens; noon arrives with its hurried rest and hastily eaten meal, which, somewhat symbolically, is also observed at the zoo. Then evening falls over Berlin, workshops and offices close, and the return migration of the masses begins. The lights of the entertainment venues flare up. And in the variété, cinema, and casino, the day in Berlin sinks into oblivion, exploding in the fireworks of Luna Park.

Berlin as seen by a traveler. Berlin, set to an American literary tempo—too little of the life of the masses is shown. They play, someone should tell Mr. Ruttmann, more skat than roulette in this city. In the evening, you see tired people. They are missing from the film.

But what the film brings in terms of images is so unprecedented, so novel, so gripping that minor critical objections are insignificant in terms of the overall impression. Never before has the problem of the machine been mastered in such a fantastical way and symbolically heightened. Ruttmann merges man and city. He does not employ actors; he does not even recognize faces. He captures people's gestures, figures, and tempo. He is objective and sober. But that is precisely why the film is so enchanting. A masterpiece.



## RUDOLF KURTZ

### **Berlin: The Symphony of the Metropolis**

First published as "Berlin. Die Sinfonie der Großstadt," in: *Lichtbild-Bühne*, No. 229, September 24, 1927.

This energetic exploration of undiscovered or underdeveloped areas of film was penalized when its quota entitlement was withdrawn. Despite its strong cinematic rhythm, the film was denied "feature film" status. This powerful portrayal of chaotic big-city life was not accepted into the 100% commercial film category. The American Fox company cannot use it for one of its domestic film quotas because it has only the status of a "cultural film." This decision was made by a German authority. It's impossible to discuss this serious work of art without mentioning this absurd decision.

Ruttman's film is not merely a collection of photographs of Berlin. The city is portrayed as a setting for an infinitely varied life, realized through countless daily episodes that together produce an intoxicating and overwhelming feeling of a "world city." Ruttman is carried by this experience, and the film's aesthetic task is to allow this feeling to swell into a powerful chord. The film is aptly called a "symphony." Its structure is thoroughly compositional, with elements that betray the hand of a composer, such as chords, dampening, *prestissimo*, and *adagio*. This is the big city as an artist feels it: a creation of iron, blood, and light, filled with the powerful roar of life that leaps from the film and overwhelms the audience. (...)

Ruttman could only have achieved this effect by collaborating with the gifted cinematographer Karl Freund. Freund's work is unparalleled in cinematography. This film dispenses with studio aids. There are hardly any actors to bring life to the streets and dive bars. Freund found angles that transformed everyday buildings, storefronts,

encounters, and collisions into surprisingly powerful images. An artistic eye can capture the latent energy of a building or the steep rise of a tower from below, above, and through lateral shifts in a way that the imagination of a painter could hardly express. People are observed with a closeness that no other film has ever achieved. One watches with alarm, amusement, and bewilderment as a man lights a cigar. Unaware that he is being filmed with the small, barely visible Pathé camera, he lets himself go. Before this film, no one knew about or paid attention to the grotesque and ever-changing spectacle of the process. Freund is a master at capturing the effect of light. He photographs the dawn over the city with unparalleled artistry, capturing light in unprecedented ways through its functions of emphasizing, creating form, underscoring, and softening. The photographic achievements of this film will spread the fame of German cinematography throughout the world.

Carl Mayer conceived the idea for this film years ago. The script is based on his drafts. Any critical review of this film would be incomplete without mentioning Mayer, the screenwriter and the closest thing to a poet in film today. We must also acknowledge cameraman Reimann Kuntze, whose use of hypersensitized film to shoot in twilight and darkness made these photographic achievements possible. Cameramen Robert Baberske and László Schäffer were also involved in filming. (...)

This cinematic masterpiece has been dismissed as commercially insignificant by a German authority. If this misjudgment is not rectified soon, no American company will ever consider investing in Germany's first-class cinematic assets again!

## HANS FELD

### The Symphony of the Berlin Film

First published as "Die Symphonie des "Berlin"-Fims, in: *Film-Kurier*, no. 226, September 1927

Edmund Meisel composed the film's music. For the first time, film music appears on an equal footing with the film itself, merging with it to form a whole. The music is no longer merely a composition for the film; it is an integral part of the work itself.

Meisel chose the symphonic form, a unified composition with a consistent theme throughout. He had two options: He could create music based on the experience of watching the film—a musical depiction of the big city—or transpose the film's essence into music.

He could also transpose the film's essence into music. The result is his work, which corresponds to the film's expression. The acoustic experience synchronizes with the visual. Photographed music. Despite its dissonance, this music is new and cannot be classified as atonal, colorful, or naturalistic. It makes use of all technical aids and is a consummate piece of technique itself.

It represents the intrusion of technology into music and the possibility of a new art form. This music is analogous to new stage design, based on destroying the old stage to create a new one. Others may take different paths than Meisel did with this music. Undoubtedly, others will follow in his footsteps and produce many notable musical works. However, it should be noted that Meisel did not intend for this piece to be considered a musical art form. Fusing film and music requires different forms of expression.



## PAUL FRIEDLÄNDER

### Berlin — Symphony of the Big City

In *Die Rote Fahne* (September 25, 1927)

A film experiment at the Tauentzien-Palast. Taken as a whole, a successful experiment, artistically and technically outstanding.

A film that dispenses with plot, actors, and connecting titles; a film that seeks to be nothing other than a visual and musical symphony of metropolitan Berlin.

By express train one rushes into the great city at daybreak. One sees it emerge: allotment gardens, factories, apartment blocks, immense railway installations. Arrival in the sleeping city. Bird's-eye views. Street scenes.

The city awakens. The workers are the first to appear. In great masses they stream toward the factories. The giant machines begin to stir, the drive belts whirl. Production begins.

The shutters are raised. The tremendous traffic roars. Elevated railway, rapid transit, streetcars, buses, automobiles, horse-drawn wagons. Schoolchildren skip off to school. Office employees hurry to their desks. The entire city is filled with surging life. A thousand images overwhelm the senses; reality and advertising flow into one another.

Then comes the lunch break. Construction workers under the open sky: herring and sausage. Businessmen in elegant restaurants: roast meat and mayonnaise.

And the symphony of the metropolis continues until evening arrives and the entertainments begin. In the West, theaters, luxury establishments, bars, and Charleston dancers bustle with activity; in the East, the smoke-filled beer hall resounds with noise. Night falls, and the metropolis once again goes to sleep.

A good idea: to capture the metropolis as it really is, to make shots that are not "staged." What director Ruttmann and his excellent cameramen have achieved is well worth seeing.

And yet there is one persistent flaw. A flaw that causes everything we see to appear somehow chaotic and meaningless. A flaw that also causes the film's external shortcomings. For despite the rushing, constantly changing content and "tempo," one senses certain stretches of monotony—especially in the traffic sequences.

What is missing is the guiding idea (*Leitidee*). The metropolis lacks a plot. Berlin appears here without its historical character, without any concrete purpose. The filmmakers wanted to present it without a point of view or tendency. But reality itself is embodied tendency. Berlin is a capitalist metropolis. Capitalism gives it its distinctive character: the pursuit of profit. Every minute in this city is filled with class antagonism and class struggle. And this historical tendency must be grasped and represented. Whoever does not do so merely films the façade. "Objectivity" turns into its opposite. (Especially when the film's only political moment is the Hindenburg sequence.)

An example: in this film we are not taken inside the apartments. We see the houses only from the outside. But if one were to look into the apartments in the morning, one would see, at six o'clock, the proletarian washing himself in a basin in a stuffy, overcrowded, dark room, while—at eight or nine in the morning—the businessman emerges from his healthy, beautiful bedroom and proceeds into his tiled bathroom. One would then see what the one and the other eat for breakfast, and so forth.

One should have filmed, throughout the entire day, the lives of both the proletarian and the bourgeois in Berlin.

That is why this film, despite some contrasting images of East and West, yields little in economic, social, or political insight. In contrast to the Piscator film *Hoppla, wir leben!* ("Hey There, We're Alive!"), it does not move beyond the cultural and technical superstructure.

Incidentally, it would be interesting to see a film called "Moscow"—the film of a city whose character is shaped not by the bourgeoisie but by the proletariat.



## GONG

### Film of the Future

First published as "Film der Zukunft," in: *Deutsche Republik 2* (October 7, 1927)

This film! It is neither a sweet nor a heroic symphony. Nor is it embellished or spared by any plot. Its diva, plot, and antagonist are all named Berlin. The ending is neither happy nor tragic. A "rushing reporter" has photographed this Berlin, staging it. He is cold yet enthralled by his subject. He is dogged and full of heart for only a few seconds, then he becomes objective and unsentimental, merely reporting. Awakening in Berlin reveals dead streets, loiterers, security patrols, closed windows, and crooked blinds. Outside the city gates is the silent, fertile countryside. There, milk grows in cows' bodies. A sign next to them reads, "Berlin, 5 kilometers." Berlin awakens quickly, in bursts. It barely rubs its eyes before opening them bright and hastily.

Now, houses hurl out workers and employees. Streetcars, buses, and subways swallow them up and spit them back into factories. Machines shape and destroy. People operate the machines, and the machines serve people. Berlin sends its children to the streets and to school. Cattle are driven to slaughterhouses and civil servants to their offices. Now, Berlin threatens, races, and thunders. Advertisers, hawkers, and salespeople arrive by car, train, and foot. Strangers pour into the city and disappear into the maelstrom. The unleashed hell continues to roar, hiss, and bubble. Shovels are lowered horizontally as people fight westward and northward for luxury. The ice bar yawns in the zoo. Men try it on, and a woman throws herself into the water and dies. Finished. Onward, Berlin. Onward. A prostitute hits the

streets. An old woman begs. A wedding couple steps out of the church. In between, it's lunchtime. People eat and drink quickly in standing beer halls and luxury hotels. Only the lion at the zoo has time to gnaw on his bones. Meanwhile, Berlin wipes its mouth. The half-hour break is over. The engines start up again, pulling everything along with them. Anyone not caught up in the movement gets run over. Finally, evening falls, bringing sports, the funfair, love, the Wannsee, the Grunewald, nighttime, cinema, dancing at the Wintergarten and Scala, opera, theater, and radio.



# NEW OBJECTIVITY

## BÉLA BALÁZS

### By the Way

First published as "Nebenbei," in *Film-Kurier* 244 (October 15, 1927)

After the great press success of the film symphony *Berlin*, I hope I will not disturb the festive mood if I recall a few things of which Walter Ruttmann's serious and resolute work reminded me. For on this occasion the new art of New Objectivity was being proclaimed everywhere, and the film of the future, of mere photographic perception, was being prophesied—that future film in which art is supposed to prove itself solely through editing.

Before I, too, join the prophets, permit me a brief look back. For we have already experienced a few times that "dead" objects, even without acting and without poetic embellishment, can acquire dramatic life and poetic significance in film. To be sure, these were only isolated moments in feature films. But they were convincing.

There was once a Griffith film in which the good name, and therefore the happiness, of a woman is endangered by a press campaign. The decisive attack begins: the enormous technical operation of a world-newspaper printing plant appears on the screen like a squadron of tanks. Rotary presses roar and hurl forth—we know it!—deadly slander. They appear to us like dangerous batteries engaged in furious battle. The technical operation, neutral in itself, acquires a face through the meaning given to it here. Then cascades of newspapers slide toward us on the conveyor belt. An avalanche that—we know it!—will bury a human happiness. The comparisons I am making are intended by these images themselves. And so, through these relations, the purely technical image acquires the expression of a gesture.

When the battleship *Potemkin* sets out for its final battle, we see the machines at work. First we look into the faces of the sailors, and then into the face of the machines, which they have acquired precisely through this sequence. Comrade Machine joins the fight! The tempo of the flywheel expresses excitement; the steam expresses panting ecstasy. The images of the machines have dramatic life—because they signify dramatic experience.

In another Russian film, the enthusiastic crowd listens to Lenin's speech: close-ups of burning eyes, overcome with emotion. Then—shattering naïveté!—the springs of running but disengaged automobile engines tremble softly like the pulse arteries of the machine.

In another Russian film, showing scenes of laborious and heroic construction, a locomotive is finally repaired by the workers and, after three years, leaves the engine shed for the first time. Workers stand along the track with tears in their eyes and take off their hats. And the locomotive moves slowly, then faster and faster, into the rising sun. What does this locomotive mean between this guard of honor?!

And in the film symphony *Berlin*—yes, when at the end the radio tower swings its searchlight beam like a gigantic standard beneath the sky, there is a gesture of victorious pride, of life's force. Through the gesture, however, recognizable within it, the image of the object becomes art. Through anthropomorphic gesture and physiognomy it receives meaning, significance, and relation. The metaphor that it means, and that it imposes upon the viewer, is decisive.

For one really need not make a fetish of art. There are also other things that are interesting, stimulating, and perhaps even more important. But we do not want to smear over our power of discrimination! "Without people" does not yet mean without human meaning—and the latter should not be called "art" as long as that word still has a special meaning. Mechanical perception, or emotionally inflected perception? In the latter case, the artist reflects himself and the meaning he wants to give. Of course, a good newsreel or cultural film is often more interesting. But artists like Ruttmann, Freund, and Mayer were never as radical as their critics, and never thought that such objectivity represented the only path into the future for film art.

A curious Dionysian frenzy is spreading among us: a masochistic intoxication of self-denial; the ecstatic desire to disappear into the "thing," into the immense mechanism of social and technical operations. But let this urge to be an object among objects not present itself as socialist! The vision of such a mechanized way of life is a vision of big industry. By contrast, the "Blue Blouses," those Soviet-Russian workers who recently danced for us: they danced machines! They do not dream of becoming automatons of labor, machine-parts. On the contrary. Even in the "machine" that had become their workmate, they find the human gesture and the rhythm of play and dance. And Comrade Machine receives a friendly face.

# RUTTMANN VS VERTOV

## SIEGFRIED KRACAUER

### We Can Do It

First published as „Wir schaffens,“ in Frankfurter Zeitung, No. 856, November 17, 1927

This film, Berlin, is a terrible disappointment. Although it contains excellent photographs that capture unusual perspectives and strange details – such as houses from below, gutters, and bread wobbling in an oven – the film itself is disappointing. It contains skillful cross-fades and transitions from one object to another according to strictly optical criteria. Technically, it is flawless and not without visual imagination. But is this Berlin?

It doesn't accurately depict the city or its landmarks, such as Potsdamer Platz, Alexanderplatz, and Molkenmarkt. Nor does it show the suburbs and their expansive groves stretching to Wannsee. The Berlin depicted in the film includes these landmarks and extends into the suburbs with large groves stretching to Wannsee. Depending on one's profession and social class, the Berlin experienced by workers, employees, business owners, and the upper bourgeoisie has certain features within a certain radius. It is a Berlin organized according to the time of day. From the inside, it has a stable structure. Not even the Berlin seen by a modest observer is static.

Why not? Because the gentlemen did not have the modest ambition to show the city as it really is. Rather, they had the boundless ambition to compose a "symphony of the big city." They were poor composers. They had hackneyed literary ideas before seeing anything. Berlin is a city where speed and work run rampant. "We can do it," as Ludendorff said, was their motto. They reveled in the frenzy,

confusion, contrasts, machine parts, buses crossing each other at Potsdamer Platz, gymnastic security guards, and the entire stupid machinery. Fortunately, this is not Berlin itself, but rather a sum of confused ideas that literary minds have conceived of a big city according to their own concepts. These minds revel in the senseless juxtaposition of glamour and misery, right and left, because their imagined big city swallows unresolved contrasts. They picture hearses following rolling trams because they believe that death is irrelevant and that life goes on. In short, they never know what matters.

This is why no detail in this "symphony" functions as a symbol. While great Russian films depict columns, houses, and squares with incredible clarity and human significance, here, fragments are strung together, and no one can guess why. Is this Berlin? No, it's a gruesome imprint produced by embarrassing intellectualism. Can we do better? We have already failed once.

\*

*NOTE: For a critical analysis of Kracauer's critique, see David Macrae, "Ruttman, Rhythm, and 'Reality': A Response to Siegfried Kracauer's Interpretation of Berlin. The Symphony of a Big City." In Expressionist Film - New Perspectives. Ed. Dietrich Scheunemann (Rochester: Camden House, 2003), 251-270. See also the last paragraph of Kracauer's review of Vertov's film below.*



Screenshot of Vertov, *The Man with a Movie Camera* (1929)

## SIEGFRIED KRACAUER

### **The Man with a Movie Camera: A New Russian Film**

First published as „Der Mann mit dem Kinoapparat: ein neuer Russischer Film,“ in *Frankfurter Zeitung*, No. 369, May 19, 1929

Now a new Russian film has arrived in Berlin that proves that the Russians have not remained stagnant once they have reached a certain level.

I had the opportunity to see it at the Russian Trade Mission.

It is called *\*The Man with the Movie Camera\** and is to be shown publicly for the first time during the Stuttgart exhibition “Film and Photo.”

Dziga Vertov, the director, began his career as a mechanic. Today he is the leading representative of the group “Kino-Eye” (*\*Kinoki\**) and works hand in hand with Ms.

Esther Shub, the leader of the "Constructivists." Both avant-garde groups have rejected feature films and condemn the studio, actors, and staged decorations.

They choose, as they must, social themes; their material is reality. Since it is not artistically preformed, their emphasis is on the raw material.

\*The Man with the Movie Camera\* wants to portray nothing less than life—the collective life of a city. At dusk, he roams the city and eavesdrops on people's sleep and the fragmentary existence that stirs silently. The city awakens, stretches, and yawns. Teeth are brushed, shutters are raised, and the city is filled with the bustle of morning.

There is movement, a single powerful movement that seizes what was previously fragmented and brings all the elements—connecting rods, street people, the contractions of a woman in labor—together and melts them into one another so that they are immersed in the rhythm of the whole.

After work, the flow does not stop, but changes direction. The working people bathe and try out all kinds of sports. Then comes the evening with its shooting galleries, Chinese magicians, beer halls, and movie theaters. A day comes to an end. Tomorrow it will continue; year in, year out.

The city is the center of the universe.

This is the life that the operator, the \*Man with the Movie Camera\*, records. But he also records himself, because without him, the subject, life would not be an object for us—and object and subject belong together. We see him in desperate situations: digging himself in with his crank box to photograph a train from below; hanging in an incomprehensible way on the outside of a tram; operating the camera while standing in a car. And cinema itself appears, in which the hunted life is presented to the viewer as an image.

So there are two main actors in this film: the collective of things and people in a city and the \*Man with the Movie Camera\*, who takes control of the collective. On the one hand there is the object, on the other the "cinema nugget." The relationship between the two determines the character of the film. It is highly unusual; in any case, it is not simply a matter of the operator depicting the object.

For a moment, one might disregard the operator and his manipulations and consider only the filmed object world. What remains is a film consisting entirely of associations.

Ruttman probably had something similar in mind with \*Berlin: Symphony of a Great City\*. But while his associations are purely formal—he seems to be content with external, unexplained connections even in his sound films—Vertov, through montage, extracts meaning from the connection between fragments of reality. Ruttman presents a juxtaposition without explaining it; Vertov interprets it by depicting it.



