

**Carl Mayer's Complaint:
Documentary Cutting and the
Ethical Limits of Formalism**

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Films and photographs are unique among artifacts, for by means of them we may see objects and events that we might have seen as they occurred before the camera as the film was exposed. The ethical responsibilities of those making them with respect to the objects and events that they enable us to see are therefore of especial importance, and those of documentary workers distinctively so.

I wish in this essay to acquaint you with one of the earliest and most resonant examples in the history of filmmaking of a filmmaker taking another to task for transgressing the ethical limits of formalism, for if the grievance is as profound as I believe it to be, its implications far transcend the documentary discipline of its origin.

The Coming of Sound

1926 was the watershed year for the making of movies. A host of secondary achievements were to distinguish it from others before and after.

Stroheim had completed *THE MERRY WIDOW* a year before, making \$4.5 million for the studio and signalling thereby the end for half-a-generation of filmmakers working within the dominant filmmaking centre of the world to the Porter-Griffith tradition of 'realistic' presentations of working class people within Hollywood productions;

THE BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN was released to become a cause célèbre in both Europe and America;

Pudovkin completed his first epic film, *MOTHER* and saw his seminal texts on film design widely distributed widely within the Soviet Union (and by 1929 in German and English abroad); and

Robert Flaherty released *MOANA*, his second and last silent film.

Crucially, however,

Western Electric, having been rebuffed a year earlier when attempting to interest the major studios in its new sound-on-disk system, licensed the Vitaphone process to one of the smaller studios in Hollywood, Warner Brothers, precipitating the only encompassing revolution in the history of art.

By the time synchronous sound came to the American cinema in 1926, the pieces of the puzzle of how to secure perceptual 'continuity' between the successive shots of a movie had long lain on the table and sections of its solution had been solved. Rules of thumb for both fictional and documentary directing and editing had been collected, refined and passed on from master to apprentice for a generation or more, many of lasting value. The coming of sound upset many directors and editors, nevertheless, for it confirmed that much of what they thought they knew about how to cut without impediment between pairs of shots had depended upon an accident of silent film practice.

Documentary filmmakers in particular had accustomed themselves to inserting *titles* as needed to avoid distracting 'jump cuts' between pairs of shots.

With the option of inserting titles no longer available when making movies with synchronous sound, what was one to do?¹

Pairs of shots within documentary movies, as in enacted ones, appear in sequence and must be registered perceptually and without ado within the unified experiential histories of viewers if they are to be encountered as richly, freely and deeply as possible. The solution to the problem of how to cut smoothly between pairs of shots within films of either kind must therefore lie somewhere within our understanding of how human beings observe things about them without discontinuity, as Pudovkin's precept had implied.² But how?

¹ For a discussion of the dilemma as confronted by a filmmaker of singular importance, see my essay entitled "Growing Things: the Rural Patience of Robert Flaherty" within the Evan Wm. Cameron Collection.

² Pudovkin had by his precept shown filmmakers how to achieve continuity between pairs of shots taken of causally connected events. Few recalled, however, that he had noted in passing that his precept could be applied as well to intercutting between events spatially distant from one another whose causal connections would only subsequently be disclosed, and had even referred occasionally to its usefulness when cutting between contrasting though causally unrelated events. Most filmmakers, therefore, never realised that his precept could therefore be used with equal facility to determining the continuities within movies between pairs of shots of causally unrelated events.

Editors obliged to cut between pairs of shots of "found footage" faced the problem most acutely: images taken from newsreels, war records, travelogues and documentaries that had been captured by cinematographers on battlefields or while facing rapidly shifting events under other documentary stresses who had often been lucky simply to have been able to record them in focus without any idea of the continuities within which they would finally be placed. Habits derived from sequencing shots from among those taken of the causally-connected events of an enacted scene were inapplicable, or seemingly so, for the footage as found seldom if ever encompassed establishing shots of unified actions permitting selective attention within others. And yet, as every documentary filmmaker knew only too well, such footage could prove to be 'good' or 'bad' (more or less useful, more or less easily cuttable), and, as noted above, the solution had something to do with avoiding 'jump-cuts' – something to do, that is, with creating and sustaining a unified and uninterrupted cinemematical experience by viewers.

But how, for example, ought documentary directors and cinematographers to constrain themselves when photographing events to be placed within continuities as yet unthought of, if they wished their footage to be editable?

To what aspects ought they to attend?
From what angles ought they to photograph them? or
How much of an event ought they to show within the frame?

And how thereafter could editors, even with broad strategies in mind, select from within such footage the pieces that could be conjoined cohesively?³

Everyone had noticed, of course, that viewers, when attending by means of a movie to an object seen to be shifting from place to place within whatever space it occupied, could do so only by focusing upon a sequence of points on the *screen* before them. Viewers could attend to an object by means of film, that is, only by focussing their eyes upon an ordering of points upon a surface within in their *own space*.

Many filmmakers had therefore drawn a rough but ready working distinction between the *form* of a shot and its *substance* – between the points and patterns of light and darkness on the screen by means of which we see the object, and the object that we see by doing so. Prior to 1926, consequently, two traditions had arisen among filmmakers obliged to establish noncausal continuities, the first treating viewers' perceptions of

³ Although loud music and a voice-over narrator could blur many things when added in post-production, a 'jump-cut' continued to jump no matter how hard one tried to pretend otherwise.

films formally, the other substantially, each concentrating upon its aspect to the virtual exclusion of the other. Although oftentimes of momentary brilliance, the continuities achieved were flawed.

By concentrating solely on the formal one could indeed cut smoothly, but only by trivializing the identity of the events seen;

By focusing on their identity alone one was unable to cut smoothly, and hence had to rely on an accident of the silent film (the use of titles) to blur the discontinuities inhering in the edited footage.⁴

To illustrate the nature and consequences of the first tradition, let me turn to the making in Germany of a movie conceived in 1925, fashioned in 1926 and released to world-wide acclaim in 1927 that occasioned a quiet but penetrating division amongst its makers, the Mayer-Freund-Ruttman production of *BERLIN: SYMPHONY OF A CITY*, attending particular to the contribution and complaint of its screenwriter, Carl Mayer, who, having conceived of it, withdrew from its making for exemplary reasons.

The Genesis of BERLIN: SYMPHONY OF A GREAT CITY (1927)

On a day in 1925 Carl Mayer stood amidst the traffic of the Ufa Palast am Zoo in Berlin comparing what he saw about him to the artificiality of the studio films of the Weimar Republic to which he had contributed so much. Mayer was the most important screenwriter in Germany, having co-written *THE CABINET OF DOCTOR CALIGARI* (1920) and having thereafter created singlehandedly the *Kammerspielfilm* genre through his scripts for *BACKSTAIRS* (1921), *SHATTERED* (1921), *SYLVESTER* (1923) and, most notably, *THE LAST LAUGH* (1924).⁵ Now, increasingly disenchanted with the studio's reluctance to present events without hypocrisy, he was looking for a new way of making films.

⁴ See footnote 1 above.

⁵ As Paul Rotha noted, Mayer never wrote a play, book or article; he was a screenwriter, "an integral product of the medium he loved and understood so well". Karl Freund reaffirmed the sentiment: "Carl Mayer was the only 100 per cent screen-writer I've known. The film was the first and only medium in which he created, and the camera was the first artistic instrument he used." See Appendix IV of Paul Rotha's *The Film Till Now: a Survey of World Cinema*, the revised and enlarged edition of 1960 (Norwich: Spring Books, 1967 [1930], pp. 709-717, and especially Freund's tribute on pages 716 and 717. The quotations above are from pages 713 and 716. Mayer was later to script Murnau's *SUNRISE* (1927) for the Fox studio in Hollywood, though, unlike many of his peers, he refused all offers to go there. The films of the *Kammerspielfilm* genre (films, that is, of "intimate theatre" or "instinct") were designed by him to be as unblinkingly realistic and

Suddenly, and without precedent, Mayer conceived of a film, a documentary encompassing the entire life of the city – "a melody of pictures", a "film without a story". His friend and colleague, the cinematographer Karl Freund, equally dismayed at the movies being made about him, agreed to supervise the photography of the film and soon a mountain of footage was accumulated from which BERLIN: SYMPHONY OF A GREAT CITY was to be constructed, a turning point in the history of documentary filmmaking.⁶

The studio, however, convinced that only exportable films ought to be made, and that only *arty* films were exportable into the American market (can we today even imagine construing America as an art market for films?), unfortunately assigned the editing of the film to Walter Ruttmann, a painter and noted designer of posters, a colleague of Viking Eggeling and Hans Richter, and the man who was later to direct and cut the remarkable title sequence which opens Riefenstahl's THE TRIUMPH OF THE WILL (as Hitler descends by plane through the clouds into Nuremburg) and after that to co-edit OLYMPIA.⁷

Why do I say "unfortunately"? The film, after all, has been celebrated ever since for the virtuosity of its editing. But that, as Carl Mayer affirmed when he withdrew from the production refusing to let his name appear on the credits, was exactly what a film showing people and events of Berlin *authentically* could never have occasioned.

indeed nihilistic as possible, and he rightly recognized that Hollywood would never permit such films to be made as intended.

⁶ The cinematographers who worked under Freund on BERLIN were Reimar Kuntze, Robert Baberske and Laszlo Schaffer. Mayer's stature among his colleagues can perhaps best be gauged by Freund's remark that "If one man should ever be given credit for the best film-work to come from Germany, it would have to be Carl Mayer". See Freund's tribute, *Ibid.*, page 717.

⁷ Although Ruttmann had been designated to be the filmmaker for TRIUMPH OF THE WILL, the film was reassigned to Leni Riefenstahl at Hitler's personal request prior to the Nuremburg events staged for it and Ruttmann's name appears nowhere on the formal credits for the remainder of the film; Riefenstahl's name appears as the "director/editor" of OLYMPIA as well, with Ruttmann listed as her "assistant". Although Riefenstahl was a competent actress, and an industrious producer admired and trusted by Hitler, rumours persist to this day that the design and hence power of both films was due to Ruttmann, whatever the credits may say. I share the suspicion: the historical record of their filmmaking, before and after their association with one another, seems otherwise inexplicable to me.

Ruttmann's Continuity Cutting

What did Ruttmann do, and why did Mayer object? The problem lay not in the film's strategy, which was innocuous enough: BERLIN encompasses a day in the life of the city, beginning with a prologue as a train approaches the metropolis and enters its main station early in the morning, continuing through representative activities of morning and afternoon, and concluding late at night. The problem lay in Ruttmann's tactics of continuity cutting.

Wishing to avoid both objectionable jump-cuts and the use of titles, Ruttmann extended two traditions of continuity cutting that brilliantly blunted the dilemma and of which he was thereafter an acknowledged master.

When cutting quickly, Ruttmann rendered the jump-cuts unobjectionable by establishing repetitive rhythmic patterns of them: the driving rhythms of the jumps themselves unified the perceptual presentation.

When compelled to cut slowly, Ruttmann eliminated the jump-cuts completely by matching a viewer's focal point on the screen before and after the cut.

Both techniques deserve a closer look, the former because of Mayer's objection to it and the latter because of its lasting contribution to the general precepts of continuity cutting as refined by the war-time documentarists.

Rhythmic Obliterations

As a member of that circle of German artists who were bringing the expressionistic abstractions of Weimar painting and set design into the temporal art of filmmaking, Ruttmann had learned much from the work of Vertov and Eisenstein, and BERLIN opens with a testimonial to the tradition – a prologue encompassing a rapidly intercut sequence of close-ups and medium shots of a train travelling into the city. By means of them we see neither the city nor its people but only three kinds of objects.

Railroad tracks;
Telephone wires passing overhead (sometimes including the poles); and
Engine wheels of the train.

Four patterns of movement are distinguished within the shots.

Toward the camera;
Left-to-right;
Bottom-left to top-right; or
Rotational (circular).

Commencing with its eighth shot, the prologue of the film unfolds as follows:

Length:	Subject:	Type:	Movement:
5 fs	Wires	MS	L-to-R
6 fs	Wheels	CU	Circular
8 fs	Wires	MS	BL-to-TR
5 fs	Tracks	CU	Head on
8 fs	Wires	MS	L-to-R
7 fs	Wheels	CU	Circular
8 fs	Wires	MS	BL-to-TR
5 fs	Tracks	CU	Head on
8 fs	Wires	MS	L-to-R
7 fs	Wheels	CU	Circular
8 fs	Wires	MS	BL-to-TR
4 fs	Tracks	CU	Head on
8 fs	Wires	MS	L-to-R
8 fs	Wheels	CU	Circular
8 fs	Wires	MS	BL-to-TR
5 fs	Tracks	CU	Head on
5 fs	Wires	MS	L-to-R
8 fs	Wheels	CU	Circular
8 fs	Wires	MS	BL-to-TR
7 fs	Tracks	CU	Head on

Several shots later Ruttmann breaks the pattern to include a few shots of other objects, returning to it again as the train is about to enter the city, this time using shots a few frames longer.

One need only read down each column, listening within one's inner ear to the imagined sounds of the items as they succeed one another, to *hear* an aural analogue of the visual rhythm being established and sense the formal game being played. Ruttmann, in fact, intended the combined rhythms to mimic the rhythms of a travelling train, especially when reinforced by Edmund Meisel's score.⁸

Clever! So what's wrong with the game that Ruttmann is playing?

The attention of viewers is being diverted from the objects and events encountered to the cleverness of the filmmaker using them as *means* to a formal *end* having nothing to do with any aspect of their natures other than how they happen to appear within the shots.

Ruttmann could as easily have established rhythms indistinguishable from the above using shots of cabbages, carrots and cauliflowers, or knives, forks and spoons.

Carl Mayer was but the first of many to complain of the disregard by a filmmaker of the natures of the objects and events encountered by means of a movie – a disrespect oft-compounded by Ruttmann in the second of his editing techniques as well.

Matching Points of Attention

The problem of eliminating the discontinuities of jump-cuts from causal films had long drawn the attention of studio filmmakers. As early as 1921, for example, Austin Lescarbourea could report that filmmakers in Hollywood had largely overcome the problem of "eye-strain" caused by cuts that forced viewers to switch their attention abruptly, either through compositional disparities or mismatched illumination in successive scenes.

⁸ For an extended commentary upon this and other aspects of Ruttmann's work within the movie, see Jiri Kolaja's and Arnold W. Foster's "'Berlin, the Symphony of a City" as a Theme of Visual Rhythm', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (1965), pages 353-58 [doi:10.2307/428181] – a work of contrary provocation that I discovered only after fashioning my own estimate of them. My account of the details of the shots in sequence of Ruttmann's opening of the film differs from the authors, perhaps from our having access to divergent prints of the movie when assessing its structures.

For instance, if in one scene the eyes have been drawn to a figure on the extreme left, and in the next the point of interest lies to the extreme right, the onlooker is immediately disconcerted and his eyes seek out the new point of interest only after suffering eyestrain and momentary confusion. Again, if one scene has been made in the open, in bright sunlight, and the next is uniformly dark, the quick change from a bright scene to a dark one and particularly vice versa is quite trying.

Already producers have given much attention to the matter of scene changes on the screen. The more advanced producers at this moment have more or less overcome all sudden changes in either light or points of interest. Where successive scenes do not match up sufficiently to permit of going directly from one to the next, the various devices such as the 'fade-in' and 'fade-out', the various vignettes, and so on are employed. In this manner the eyes are gradually removed from one scene and introduced to the next.⁹

By 1927 matching points of attention over cuts was such a standard practice within Hollywood that Jan and Cora Gordon, causal observers on a visit, could derive it as an articulated precept:

Consider three consecutive scenes, A, B, and C. If at the close of A the interest is placed on the right, then scene B, although perhaps quite unconnected in subject matter with A, must begin with the interest concentrated almost at the point which the eye was watching at the close of A, or it must continue a movement suggested by A. Again, whatever the action may be that runs through B, scene C must pick up the interest at the local spot where B ceases. So that the eye is danced about insensibly, but is never steeplechased.¹⁰

Ruttman extended and refined this practice of matching points of attention across cuts by applying it to events unconnected causally, as Grierson's propagandists were to do after him. Unlike the Griersonians, however, Ruttman made no pretence, here or thereafter, of restraining himself by considerations of *substance*. He cut smoothly

⁹ Austin Celestin Lescarboua, *Behind the Motion-Picture Screen*, 2nd Edition (New York: Scientific American Publishing Company, 1921), page 408. I am indebted to Kristin Thompson for drawing my attention to this work, and to the work that I cite in the note following as well, in her essay (Chapter 18) on "The Stability of the Classical Approach after 1917" in David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), ppage 235 and 236.

¹⁰ Jan and Cora Gordon, *Star-Dust in Hollywood* (London: Harrap & Company, 1931), page 105-106. Although the Gordon's report of their visit to Hollywood was not published until 1931, the authors are describing practices they observed in the studios in 1927. Note that the Gordons, not being filmmakers, use the word 'scene' to mean 'shot'.

between objects and events having no nonformal relevance to one another simply by matching the points of attention before and after the cut.

No one can say for certain who took what from whom during this period, nor exactly when an extension of a precept became an established practice. We need only note here that every refinement Ruttmann made to the practice was as flawed as his technique of rhythmic cutting had been, namely smoothness of formal continuity obliterated the continuities of substance. To cut smoothly between two objects *appearing* similarly on the screen (objects, that is, whose patterns of light and darkness happened to fall at identical points on the screen, or shared similar shapes or moved in similar directions) was to derive a continuity from accidents of *appearance* rather than substance, and hence to prohibit the deep and rich concentration on their full identities that only attention to substance allows.

As Paul Rotha put it, Ruttmann's "surface approach" destroyed a viewer's ability to encounter the objects seen as deeply and richly as their identities required.¹¹ He had trivialized them in pursuit of a clever continuity – exactly the criticism that Carl Mayer had made of the movie when he refused to participate further in its production.

Conclusion

Many artists of the 20th century have condemned others for using people and things for their own ends. Few, however, have bothered to measure themselves against the standard, for it would too often have proved inconvenient. Carl Mayer was an exception, and we must register clearly how deeply his critique cut and at whom it was directed.

Mayer was no philistine ranting against formalism. Rather, he was defending the integrity of objects seen against their misuse as means to lesser ends by artists or anyone else.

If you want to play with patterns of light and colour, Mayer was implying, go right ahead and do it! – but don't use the patterns of light and colour of how objects and events *appear*, for to do so is to treat them as if their identities consist solely of the patterns of their appearances and thus to demean them, for objects and events are much more than that.

¹¹ The phrase is Paul Rotha's from "It's in the Script", *World Film News*, Sept., 1938, page 205, as cited by Siegfried Kracauer within his *From Caligari to Hitler: a Psychological Study of the German Film*, 2nd Paperback Edition (New York: Noonday Press, 1960 [1947]), page 184).

Mayer would have appreciated animated musical patterns of light and colour and even pixilations of objects, I suspect, for a cabbage dancing atop a table may well evoke warranted wonder because of its naturally evident extraordinariness within a film structured to permit viewers to bring all of their perceptual and conceptual intuitions about cabbages, tables and dancing to bear upon them. To do as Ruttmann was doing, however, or as Vertov or Eisenstein had done before him, was to strip objects of their full identities – social, political, artistic and otherwise – in the service of playing a game without regard to them.

Carl Mayer was thereby objecting, indeed, to much of contemporary society and especially to its *art*. He was appalled at the misuse of human beings for economic and political ends in the Weimar Republic, exactly as he had been appalled earlier at the denaturalization of CALIGARI at the hands of the studio.¹² To misuse people and things was unethical and especially so when supposedly sanctioned by *artistic* license, for unethical artists degrade things, reaffirming thereby society's tendency to do the same without appearing to share the blame.

Mayer's criticism was to echo through the history of filmmaking. If he was right, as I surely think he was, then Ruttmann's readiness later to use the techniques of oblitative cutting upon images of human beings in the service of National Socialism was neither an isolated error nor an accident.

Ruttmann's disrespect of objects and events was of a piece with much of what passes for being 'artistic' in film, including a good part of the experimental tradition, much of the independent feature industry, advertisements without exception and almost every moment of television.

To their credit, many documentary filmmakers since Mayer have retrained themselves to share his sensibility. Serious documentarists, especially those working within the constraints of *cinéma vérité*, have seldom since shown objects as disrespectfully as Ruttmann did, or after him Cavalcanti, Steiner, Watts or even Rotha or Grierson, and that is to the good. Formal continuities that fly in the face of the nature of the objects and events encountered have in larger part vanished from documentaries recognized for their excellence by fellow filmmakers.

¹² THE CABINET OF DOCTOR CALIGARI (1920) had been redesigned by the studio through the imposition of a pair of scenes opening and closing the film to compel us to construe the events we see as having occurred in a *dream* of a psychotic patient rather than being encountered directly as intended by Mayer and Hans Janowitz, the co-writers.

So all things are now working for good within documentary filmmaking, eh? You jest!
But that's a long story, and we must now pause, thankful for small blessings.